米澤穂信
Honobu Yonezawa
ふたりの距離の概算
It walks by past
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It walks by past

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Prologue - Too Long When Simply Running

1. Present: 0km

In the end, it didn't rain. To think I had prayed as much as I had, too.

My prayer didn't go through last year either. This could only mean that praying for rain was completely useless. Now that I understood this, I suppose I'd be able to peacefully come to terms with the inevitable next year when this happens again. If I don't need to do something, I won't do it. If I absolutely have to, I'll make it quick. Today, I, Hōtarō Oreki, learned that praying for rain was something I didn't need to do.

Of the thousand or so Kamiyama High School students that were initially spread about the school grounds, a third had already disappeared. They had set off on a journey to the far reaches of the distant horizon. I knew that what they were doing was nothing more than profitless toil, but I felt no sympathy. After all, I would soon be following after them in their suffering.

With an ear-grating howl, the megaphone was switched on again, and from it came a command.

"That concludes the third-years. Class 2-A, come forward."[1]

Fellow students filled into their set positions as if they were being dragged along by something. Among them were faces brimming

[1] The '2' shows their year in high school, and the 'A' indicates their specific class within that year.

with spirited passion, however, most of the students had such a look of resignation on their faces that the tranquility it radiated was almost saintly. I probably had the same exact expression on mine.

There was a line drawn in chalk on the ground. Alongside it stood a General Committee member, pistol in hand. He didn't radiate any bit of the usual no-nonsense severity normally found in a cold enforcer of cruel judgement like himself. Considering his markedly middle school face, he must be a first-year. He stared intently at his stopwatch, itself looking as if it wouldn't tolerate disorder for even a second. At the end of the day, he was just following his orders. Most likely, he wasn't even thinking about what kind of special significance his actions towards us held. Even if he were to consider it, at most it would be something along the lines of:

"I didn't make this decision. My superiors told me to do it, and I have to do what's assigned to me. It's not like I want to do this, so I hold no responsibility in the matter."

It was precisely this thought process that allowed him to be capable of such incalculable cruelty without even so much as a change in his expression. Slowly, he raised the pistol in his hand.

Perhaps even now, at this very moment, we will see a torrential rain so violent and so sudden that it will forever change the field of meteorology as we know it. And yet, the July sky remained so refreshingly clear that it pissed me off. Not even foxes would get married on a day like this.[2]

"Ready."

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[2] A *fox wedding* is an idiomatic phrase referring to a sunshower.

Ah, that's right. Didn't I realize it just a second ago? Heaven didn't respond to our prayers. I had other choice than to find the solution in a way only I could.

Even until the very end, the committee member didn't look up from his stopwatch. With a thin finger, he pulled the trigger.

An explosive noise rang out, and white smoke rose from the barrel.

This was Kamiyama High School's Hoshigaya Cup. At last, Class 2-A was ordered to start running.

Kamiyama High School was well known for the sheer amount of enthusiasm with which it treated club activities on campus, to the extent that even counting just how many clubs there were was a pain in and of itself. If I recall correctly, there were over fifty of them this year. The autumn culture festival took place over the span of three days, and the passion surrounding it was normally so intense that anyone with a cool head would agree that everyone was overdoing it a little.

On the other hand, this meant that there was an overabundance of sports events as well. Although there were no athletes from our school that looked like they could compete in last year's sports inter-high, I heard that the martial arts clubs had a fairly impressive history with it. While things started to quiet down after the culture festival ended, the sports festival started up right away, and in addition to that, a lot of major sports tournaments also took place right after the start of a new academic year. That said, I didn't find it all that grueling. It's not like I was bursting at the seams with the desire to participate either, but I could at least agree to something like playing as a volleyball receiver or running in a 200 meter relay.

If I absolutely had to, I could find it in me to work up a little sweat and show everyone a smile.

I couldn't summon even that smile, however, was when I was told to run further.

…Specifically, when I was told to run 20,000 meters.

The Kamiyama High School long-distance running tournament takes place every year at the end of May. Apparently, its actual name is the “Hoshigaya Cup.” Even though the event was supposedly named after a graduate who previously established himself in Japan as a skilled long-distance runner, no one calls it that. In contrast to how the culture festival was called something enigmatic like the “Kanya Festival” even though it had no proper name, the “Hoshigaya Cup” was usually known simply as the “Marathon Event.” In my case, however, because my friend Satoshi Fukube only ever called it the Hoshigaya Cup, the name ended up sticking for me as well.

Now, it was possible that I should've been happy considering the Marathon Event was shorter than an actual marathon, but in the end, I really wished it would have rained today. According to Satoshi, the notice concerning the use of public roads indicated that, in the event of rain, the marathon was to be stopped immediately and without resumption for the rest of the day.

However, then he also added, “But it’s strange, isn’t it? As far as I can tell from the records, the Hoshigaya Cup hasn’t been stopped once to date.”

There must be a god out there looking out for the athletes in the Hoshigaya Cup.

That god is undeniably rotten to the core.

I wore a white short-sleeved shirt and shorts that were somewhere in-between red and purple, something like a crimson. The girls wore short tights in the same color. The school's emblem was embroidered on the shirt's chest-area, and below that was sewn a paper bib displaying the student's class and name. The string holding my "Class 2-A / Oreki" bib in place was already beginning to turn ragged. Sewing it on was a pain, and I ended up doing a half-baked job anyways. Not good.

It was currently the end of May, so it didn't rain as much as it might have in subsequent rainy season.[3] Considering they wouldn't be able to hold it the next day because of the weekend if it had to be cancelled on Friday, it seemed like minimal consideration was given to the whole thing. Due to the 9:00 AM start, it was still unpleasantly cold. As the sun rose, I would almost certainly start to sweat.

On the school grounds, there was another entrance aside from the front gates, and all of Class 2-A exited from it as they started to run. Goodbye, Kamiyama High School. May we meet again in 20 kilometers.

The Hoshigaya Cup course was not very clearly defined in that the only specific instructions were really "Do a lap around the back of the school." The thing was, however, the mountainous area behind the school continued all the way to the distant, snowy Kamikakiuchi range, so in reality, the "long-distance run" was something more along the lines of long-distance mountain trek.

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[3] The Japanese rainy season (tsuyu) typically begins in early June and lasts through mid-July.

I knew the exact course.

You run a bit alongside the river that flows in front of the school and then go up hilly road to the right at the first intersection. The slope starts off gently at first but quickly ramps up in steepness. As you approach the very top, it becomes a slope that mercilessly breaks one's body.

Once you've climbed it, the road immediately drops. Just like the upward slope, the decline is much longer and more violent than one might expect, and your overworked knees will surely cry out in pain.

The end of the decline opens up a bit into a large expanse of countryside. You should be able to see the occasional house here and there. While there's little inclination in the road at this point, it continues in a straight line for what seems like eternity, so this stretch tends to do the most mental damage.

Once you reach the end of the flat section, you have to overcome another hill, but unlike the previous slope, the climb on this one isn't as violent. The thing is, however, the road becomes extremely windy at this point, and the constant hairpin turns coming one after another tend to ruin one's rhythm.

Ahead of that is an area in the north-eastern section of Kamiyama City called Jinde, the place where Chitanda's house is located. At this point, you follow a thin river downhill.

Continue making your way through the valley like this, and you will eventually return to the town area. Though, in saying this, it's not exactly like we can run alongside the dead center of a street used by cars, so, as a result, you use a back road. Once you pass by

in front of Arekusa Shrine and look past the stereotypically white Rengō Hospital, you will begin to see Kamiyama High School.

How did I know this? Well, you see, I ran it last year as well. I knew every length of the track from start to finish. But that knowledge wouldn't shorten the distance one bit. While I understood where it was we had to go, I felt it was necessary to omit the process in getting there. Even though it was probably impossible, it was likely the most optimal strategy at the same time. In other words, when needing to cover a 20km distance, one should at least be allowed to choose between using a bus or a bike. Unfortunately however, this extremely rational thought process of mine didn't seem like it would be given much consideration.

Up first was the river in front of the campus, and already issues began to crop up. The majority of the course took place in areas that had little traffic, however this section alone connected to a city bypass, so there were a considerable number of passing cars. Additionally, there wasn't anything like a curb separating the pedestrian and motor roads—only a single white line. The only reason we had to start running this early was so we didn't cause any congestion in the streets.

The students of Class 2-A ran in a single-file line inside the area marked off by the white line. This was the only point in the entire 20km during which both the fast students and the slow students had to run at the exact same pace. If they didn't, they would end up poking out into the roadway. Last year we were more-or-less allowed to expand out from the single-file line, however this year, it was strictly prohibited. It was a measure that the school took to prevent any accidents as a third-year was hit by a car in this area

yesterday. Thanks to that, we were allowed the immense pleasure of being packed into a line that was difficult to run in.

So I guess I wouldn't be walking this kilometer stretch. The line was jogging at a light, easy pace. The road ahead of me was long. If I imagined the jogging to be next-level walking instead, I suppose I could tolerate it.

We finished the kilometer section before too long, and the course swung a wide right. We veered away from the main road leading into town and approached the school's rear. Thus began the upward slope.

The single-file line crumbled away. As if they were propelled by the building frustration of not being allowed to run at their own pace, those in the class that were more physically oriented immediately broke away from the group. Several groups of girls, most likely motivated by some promise to happily run alongside each other, also began to move up.

And as for me, I slowed down.

…And slowed down even more.

I was essentially walking at that point, but I continued to make it look like I was running regardless.

Sorry to all the Hoshigaya athletes out there, but I can't afford to be happy-go-lucky like you. In the span of this 20km, there was something I absolutely had to find out, and I only had 19km left to do it. Roughly 100m into the upward slope, I heard a voice call out from behind me.

"Ah, there he is."

I didn’t turn around. The owner of the voice popped out in front of me anyways.

He, Satoshi Fukube, then got off the bicycle he had been riding.

From a distance, I thought he looked like some sort of androgynous gentleman, but up close his face looked so different from what you might have expected had you looked at his old middle school yearbook that it surprised even me. Of course, the trouble was not that his face had actually changed that much, but rather, that over the course of the previous year, he had come to lock up all of his emotions behind that façade. I didn’t realize it, however, because I hadn't been face-to-face with him for almost three days.

This year around, Satoshi became the General Committee vice-president. As the General Committee was running the Hoshigaya Cup, its members didn't need to run. After all, they set up before the race started and were expected to be distributed around the course. He wore a yellow helmet and pushed his usual mountain bike. I looked at him with a sideward glance and said, “You sure it’s fine to be slacking off like this?”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. I already made sure the race started without a hitch, and I’m not going to come back until the last runner passes the finish line.”

“Must be tough.”

I understood that the General Committee didn’t have to run as thanks for their efforts in supervising every aspect of the Hoshigaya Cup, but now this guy was going to be flying all over the 20km course on his mountain bike to report if any unforeseen situations should ever occur. Satoshi dropped his shoulders.

“Well, it’s not like I hate cycling, so it’s not all that bad, but I wouldn’t need to do this if I could only use my cellphone.”

“How about you tell them that?”

“None of the students on campus are technically allowed to carry cellphones, but in reality, if someone were to get hurt you would use a cellphone to call for help, right? They seriously need to re-evaluate their rules, I swear.”

With this he lamented over the General Committee’s inflexible organizational structure, but then a serious expression suddenly came over him.

“In any case, do you think you have an idea yet?”

As I sluggishly walked on, I responded carefully.

“Not yet.”

“Mayaka is…”

He started to speak, but faltered. I had an idea of what he wanted to say, so I started talking instead.

“It’s clear that she suspects me.”

“No, I don’t think that’s the case. It actually seems like she thinks it can’t be you. This is something someone told me, but apparently she said, ‘I don’t think Hōtarō did anything. After all, he literally does nothing.’”

A bitter smile crept across my face. Not only did that definitely sound like something Ibara would say, but it had been like that in reality as well. I did absolutely nothing yesterday.

If that's what she really thought however, things became quite problematic.

"If it's not me…"

"Exactly," replied Satoshi with a deep sigh.

If it wasn't me, there was only one other person it could be. I remembered what had happened yesterday.

2. Past: 1 Day Ago

I was reading a paperback in the clubroom after school. It was a period novel chronicling the early days of a man who became a master spy later on in his life, and it was so ridiculously interesting that I had become uncharacteristically engrossed in it.[4]

At Kamiyama High School, a place overflowing with various clubs, several of which disband and are then replaced by newer ones each year, it was quite common for clubrooms to be switched around at the start of a new academic term. That said, the Classics Club remained in the same Earth Sciences lecture room. It's not like I was particularly attached to it, but because I'd been in this room so regularly over the course of the previous year, I ended up sitting in my "usual seat." It was the chair positioned, as always, third row from the back and three seats from the window overlooking the school grounds.

As I reached the end of one of the chapters and raised my head to exhale from the excitement, the room's sliding door suddenly opened. Ibara walked in, her eyebrows furrowed and her face betraying a concerned expression.

Mayaka Ibara was a second-year now, and she had changed slightly. She had quit the Manga Research Society she was once a part of alongside the Classics Club. She herself said it was because she "just got tired of it." Judging by Satoshi's conflicted face, it

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[4] Possibly referring to the novel *Rasputin Came*『ラスプーチンが来た』by Fūtarō Yamada. The book is about a famous WWI-era Japanese spy, Motojirō Akashi, and his confrontations with Russian "mad priest" Rasputin during his younger days.

seemed there were other circumstances involved as well, but I didn't ask.

It's not like I thought her appearance had changed or anything. If you tossed Ibara into a group of new students and told a hundred people to pick out the second-year, I doubt a single person would have chosen her. She had recently started wearing clips in her hair, however had Satoshi and the others not brought it up, I would have never even noticed.

There was only me and one other person in the clubroom. Just until a little bit ago, there had been three of us.

Ibara spoke.

"Hey, did something happen?"

"No..."

The one who muttered that was Chitanda.

Eru Chitanda was the recurring Classics Club president. She hadn't cut her hair in a while, so it had grown a bit.

Ibara looked back towards the hallway and then spoke in a somewhat concealed voice.

"I just passed by Hina-chan over there. She said she wasn't going to join."

"What?"

"Her eyes were kind of red. Was she crying?"

Chitanda was at a loss for words. Without responding to the question, she muttered to herself.

“I see.”

I didn’t know what had happened.

A year passed, and as we became second-years, naturally so were there new first-years. We opened up the Classics Club for new students to join, and while there were a lot of complications along the way, finally we managed to recruit one member.

Tomoko Ōhinata had turned in a provisional club enrollment form, and all that was left was for her to submit the actual club entry form. Not only had she become extremely attached to Ibara, but she seemed to also be constantly enjoying her discussions with Chitanda. She could be a bit annoying at times, but it’s not like I was cold towards her because of that. Everyone thought she would join the club without a problem; rather, I wonder if in reality we all forgot you were even required to turn in an actual club enrollment form after the provisional one in the first place.

And now, we were being told that she wouldn’t be joining. Had all of this collapsed in the short time I had been reading my book?

Chitanda faced Ibara and spoke once more with quivering lips.

"I see,” she repeated as best she could. Even though Ibara didn't know what had happened, she listened carefully and asked, “Are you okay, Chi-chan?”

“I knew it. Because of me…”

“What do you mean ‘because of me’? If you’re talking about Hina-chan, you’re wrong. She even said it wasn’t your fault.”

“No, I’m sorry. I have to go.”

Chitana forcibly ended the conversation and left the Earth Sciences room with her bag as if she were running.

All I could do was stare.

Ibara watched Chitanda as she left and then turned around to face me. With an expressionless, monotone voice, she spoke.

“So, what happened?”

All I could do was shake my head, mouth wide-open.

3. Present: 1.2km

While there were tons of clubs, there were only so many new students. The race to recruit these incoming students reached peak ferocity every April. Last year, I didn't really have any reason to join the other clubs so I ignored the whole thing, however this time around I ended up in the center of the maelstrom. Doing it, I experienced something for the first time; it was my first true bloodbath.

New students I had never seen before were being snatched away left and right in recruiting attempts, so issues began to crop up to some extent. While it was probably true that the new students who couldn't turn down the incessant soliciting of a club they had no interest in had mostly themselves to blame, there were apparently certain clubs that had gathered massive amounts of members to pressure the first-years into joining. Using high-handed tactics like this was something that simply did not work, however. The reason behind the two-step process requiring students to submit both a provisional club entry form and an actual club entry form was to make sure the students joined of their own volition. If a student didn't turn in the actual club entry form later, they were automatically dropped.

The deadline to turn it in was this weekend, so essentially, the deadline was today.

Before anything, there was something I wanted to confirm.

"Just because you don't turn in the actual club entry form doesn't mean you can't join at a later date, right?"

"Of course. You can join or quit any Kamiyama High School club you want at any time. It's completely up to you."

After he said that, however, Satoshi continued with a slight grimace.

"The thing is though, a club's budget is based on its member count at the end of the provisional club entry period, so any member changes after that point are really looked down upon. Anyways, more importantly…"

"I know."

The problem wasn't the bureaucracy.

In all reality, the second we learned that there was some kind of trouble yesterday, we should have tried to resolve it, though I suppose there wasn't anything we could have done in the first place considering both Ōhinata and Chitanda had left by that point. Only one day had passed, and yet it already felt like it was too late. If this were to remain unresolved before everyone was separated over the weekend, Ōhinata's resignation would almost certainly end up being a done deal, and changing her mind might be impossible.

There were no classes being held today after the Hoshigaya Cup ended. You had to attend homeroom for a small period, but after that, everyone could meet with their clubs.

In other words, though today was the only day we'd be able to pull Ōhinata aside, we had hardly the time nor the chance to get into contact with her.

"That said, I don't know what specifically happened," said Satoshi with a hushed voice. "It seems like yesterday after school,

something made her extremely angry or depressed, but we have no idea what caused that, right?"

"Yeah, I was reading the entire time."

"If that's the case, then Chitanda had to have been the cause. Except now, it contradicts what Mayaka was told."

The upward slope hadn't yet become physically strenuous. Houses lined the left and right sides of the road and the hill gently continued forward. Someone nimbly caught up beside me as I continued my slow pace. He was probably a student from 2-B, the class that started after us, who had faith his legs would carry him to the end like this.

I whispered my question.

"What did Ibara say?"

Satoshi seemed to be disappointed in me at a quick glance.

"Come on, you didn't hear?"

"She didn't tell me anything."

"I wonder if she didn't have any time. I wasn't there either, so the details are a bit fuzzy."

Satoshi's eyes darted about, and then he awkwardly added, "If I remember correctly, Ōhinata said Chitanda was 'like a Buddha,' or something like that. I only remember it was something that wasn't insinuating anything mean."[5]

[5] This implies that she's kind and understanding.

I hadn't heard anything at all about this. I didn't know anything other than the fact that Ōhinata said she wasn't going to join the club.

"Was this really yesterday?"

"The phrasing might have been off, but it happened yesterday without a doubt."

Then Ōhinata had said both "I'm not going to join" and "Chitanda's like Buddha"? If that was the case, then that would honestly have me assume that she was essentially saying, "I'm not going to join, but it's not Chitanda's fault."

That would therefore mean I was the reason that Ōhinata decided to quit. Yet, I truly didn't do anything yesterday. Of course, I would be lying if I said I didn't remember nor hear anything. I talked a bit before entering the clubroom, and I did hear the occasional thing as I was reading, but that was all.

"I guess this isn't going to be simple after all."

However, then Satoshi murmured under his breath, "I wonder if that's the case."

"I think it's simple," he continued. "A new recruit joined. She changed her mind. She decided to quit. This was all that happened."

Even as I continued to more or less run, Satoshi managed to follow alongside me while pushing his mountain bike. As expected from a cycling hobbyist, his walking was top-notch.

Satoshi let out a sigh and finally started to talk.

“Hey, Hōtarō. This might be a bit cruel, but if Ōhinata quits, I think we should just give up on her. I mean she’s certainly an interesting person, and Mayaka really seems to like her, but if she herself decided on this, I don’t think we have any right to dispute that.”

He looked at me and added.

“Although I thought you’d be the one to say that instead of me.”

That wasn’t an unreasonable assumption. In reality, when Mayaka came in yesterday feeling distressed, I didn’t really think what had happened was all too important.

I’m sure Ōhinata had her own circumstances. At Kamiyama High School, you were allowed to be in up to two clubs at the same time, so if there were three you wanted to join, it would be completely understandable if you dropped the Classics Club. In any case, her intentions were unclear. Possibly she found a sport she wanted to do, or perhaps she decided to start participating in General Committee activities. Maybe she just decided she needed to concentrate on her studies. There were any number of reasons why she might have decided to quit, and the Classics Club didn’t have a single reason to dispute that. It was unfortunate, but maybe it wasn’t meant to be. Those thoughts had certainly crossed my mind at one point.

I had changed my mind on the matter for a couple of reasons however, but I didn’t feel like explaining them to Satoshi one-by-one while I was running. After this, he gets to ride his bike the rest of the way, but I’m stuck on my legs. I would only tire myself out more if I tried to talk while running, so I wanted to limit my speech as much as possible.

Probably realizing that I wasn't going to reply, Satoshi casually continued to speak.

"But you know how it goes. If you've decided on trying to dissuade her, I have no reason to stop you. So, do you plan on finding her and then begging her to not leave?"

I was immediately caught off guard.

"Begging her?"

"Yeah, lower your head like this and tell her, 'I know you must have experienced much displeasure at our hands, but I implore you, bear with it just this once.'"

Satoshi said this while gesturing with his hands, and then continued with a puzzled face.

"You weren't going to do that?"

I hadn't even thought of that. I suppose it was an option, but in the end...

"Ōhinata up and said she had a reason as to why she was quitting, right? I wonder if we can truly bring this issue to a close without knowing that reason first."

He responded with a groan.

"You're actually going to try and resolve the issue, huh. I suppose begging's not something you'd really do in the first place, although quickly apologizing and begging her by all means necessary is certainly the fastest way to go about this. It might even go over better than expected."

I wondered if that was how it'd really go. I had a hard time believing it. At the very least, I didn't think that prostrating in front of her would completely settle the issue at hand.

In the first place, it wasn't that I was doing this because I wanted to dissuade her from leaving. I'm not sure putting everything aside so I could beg her to sign the actual club entry form and then going on like I didn't know her after was something I could even do. All that would do would be put off the hassle until later. Now, I like avoiding work, and I love being able to omit it even more, but what I don't like is putting something off until later. If you see something that looks like a hassle but pretend it isn't there, having to deal with it later becomes even more of a hassle.

"I guess I'm probably not going to beg her."

"How about persuade her upfront?"

"That's also a pain. Besides, did you think I was even a smooth-talker in the first place?"

"I don't. Rather than gently convincing someone, you're more the type that settles a conversation with a single piece of sagely wisdom."

He said this and then became quiet.

He stared at my face carefully.

"Earlier you said that resolving this issue wasn't going to be simple. Are you really actually trying to figure out the exact reason why Ōhinata wants to leave?"

Calling it 'figuring out' was an exaggeration.

“I’m just trying to remember everything that happened up until now. As long as I just do that, I can spare myself the effort.”

Satoshi started thinking for a bit.

“Remember, huh? I see. In other words, you don’t think whatever made Ōhinata angry or sad was necessarily something that only happened yesterday after school. The cause, or rather the original, underlying problem, was something that happened at a different time.”

He was pretty sharp.

I knew for a fact that I didn’t do anything yesterday, and when it came to Chitanda, even if you didn’t take into consideration Ibara’s ‘Chitanda is like a Buddha’ account, the idea that Ōhinata would be so hurt and angry after talking to Chitanda made me feel like Ibara might have played it up a bit.

I felt bad saying it, but considering it was Ibara, I could understand that being the case. She seemed like the type of person that might shank you if you simply mentioned something that rubbed her the wrong way, no matter how trifling it was. When it came to Chitanda on the other hand, she would have simply tilted her head in confusion.

If I were to think about it like that, the cause might have been related in some part to something that had happened prior to yesterday. Possibly at some point, starting from when Ōhinata joined the club as a provisional member, unbearable thoughts had been slowly accumulating in her head. Perhaps yesterday, she had reached her limit.

“I said I wasn’t planning on stopping you, but… this is quite convoluted, isn’t it?”

“No kidding.”

“No matter how much you try to remember, Hōtarō, there’s no guarantee that you’ll have all the information necessary to crack this one.”

“I guess that’s true.”

It’s not like the Classics Club members were always together; even I didn’t go to the clubroom every day. There were likely tons of things I had neither seen nor heard. Had all of it started and ended while I was unaware it was even happening, just thinking would be useless.

That said, and I couldn’t tell any of this to Satoshi yet, I did have some ideas here and there. Ever since Ōhinata joined as a provisional member, there were a couple things that I thought seemed strange. Maybe if I focused my attention on those parts, something would become clear. I might be completely wrong, but at least it was somewhere to start. Besides, I had 20 kilometers. This course took far too long when simply running.

I spoke.

“If there’s anything I need to know, I’ll try asking you.”

Satoshi furrowed his eyebrows in suspicion.

“Asking me? Just to let you know, I’m going to be riding ahead of you now.”

“I know, but we're bound to pass each other again at some point, right? See you then.”

I smiled at him and continued.

"After all, Ibara and Chitanda will be coming from behind."

For a second, Satoshi stared at me dumbfounded.

"You're terrible! So that's what you were planning. How could you? Think about all the blood and sweat the General Committee poured into setting up the Hoshigaya Cup."

"Isn't it the Marathon Event?"

Without a doubt, I needed to talk with Ibara and Chitanda.

On the other hand, I also had to come into contact with Ōhinata by the end of the day.

There was only one way I could achieve both of these.

In order to prevent congestion in the streets, each of the classes' start times were staggered. I was in class 2-A. If I remembered correctly, Ibara was in 2-C and Chitanda was in the very last one, class 2-H. If I ran slowly, eventually Ibara would catch up, and if I went even more slowly than that, Chitanda would as well.

"Which class was Ōhinata in?"

"Class 1-B. No wonder you were going at such a slow pace. No, I'm relieved. Actually I'm really relieved. That's right, there's no way you'd seriously try to run all the way through to the end."

Satoshi laughed as he said this. How rude. I properly ran the course last year, even if I stopped around halfway and ended up walking for 10km or so.

"Now that I know your evil scheme, I suppose it's about time for me to get moving. Even lazing around has its limits."

He straddled his mountain bike. I thought he was going to push the pedal and ride away, but he suddenly hesitated for a second. He turned back towards me.

"I'm only going to tell you this because we're friends. Make sure you don't take this all on yourself, Hōtarō. You're the kind of person that doesn't normally care about another person's circumstances, so don't forget that you aren't responsible for anything, no matter what ends up happening with Ōhinata."

It was a mean way to phrase it, but I understood what he was trying to say. He wanted to tell me that no matter what I thought or found out, in the end, it was Ōhinata's decision. You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink.[6] I guess it would be a good idea to keep that in mind.

"I'm going now. See you again somewhere on the course."

"Yeah."

Satoshi finally started to pedal away. Even though the slope was getting steeper and steeper, his mountain bike picked up speed without staggering. He didn't even stand up to pedal. With his rear planted firmly on the saddle and his body arched forward, he pedaled further and further away.

With my small steps and sluggish running, I saw him off.

Though I said I was going to talk with Ibara and Chitanda, it wasn't as simple as it sounded.

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[6] The Japanese version of this idiom features a stubborn, already-hydrated donkey as opposed to a horse.

Even when each of them did catch up, I wouldn't be able to talk with them for very long. Especially Ibara didn't seem like she'd slow her pace for me. In the time that I had for her to catch up to and then pass me, I could probably only ask her around two questions.

I didn't have enough time to ask everything I wanted to. If I didn't decide on what I wanted to ask before she caught up, I was going to ruin my chance.

In order to ask the correct questions, I needed to correctly understand the situation. Specifically, what I need to understand was just exactly what kind of person the Kamiyama High School first-year Tomoko Ōhinata was.

…So I tried to remember. After Chitanda left yesterday, Ibara asked the only remaining person, me, a question.

"So, what happened?"

When I didn't answer, she said something else.

"You don't know? Should've seen that coming. After all, you're not one to pay attention to other people."

A single, nonchalant comment.

It almost felt like she was a bit surprised, however.

It's not like I didn't know because I was reading my book after class yesterday. Rather, I just wasn't very interested in anything Ōhinata had to say. It was probably due to things like this that Satoshi always liked to call me a "people-hater." It wasn't like that was entirely the case, but it wasn't very far off either. Perhaps from an

outsider's perspective it looked like I was becoming more and more distant from Ōhinata.

For the most part, I came to not really care at all about her personal life, about what made her happy and what had hurt her in the past. I was essentially ignoring her. I wondered if, even now, I could manage a full U-turn from that apathy. Could I do it during this 20km distance? The course took far too long when simply running, however I wondered if even that was enough time for me to try and understand someone.

I had to try and think about it, no matter what it took.

The slope became increasingly steeper, and at some point, the scenery to the left and right of the road had changed to that of a cedar forest.

Another person continued to pass me by as I dawdled forward.

I first met her in April. It was during the new-student recruitment week.

Chapter 1 - The Reception Table is Right Over Here

1. Present: 1.4km; 18.6km Remaining

Even though the entire width of the road was covered in brand-new asphalt, there was hardly a passing car in sight. On all sides of me were Kamiyama High School students wearing gym clothes. It was almost like the roads that went through the mountainous area behind the high school were expressly built for the sake of the Hoshigaya Cup. Ibara was probably going to be coming up soon from the back. Before that happened, I wanted to make sure I clearly remembered all of the events that took place during the new-student recruitment week.

The time between when a class started to run and when the next class started after them was usually around three minutes. I was in Class A and Ibara was in Class C, so that meant I had started around six minutes before she did.

For the first kilometer, I had matched my pace with that of those around me. Once I had reached the uphill slope, Satoshi caught up with me and I slowed down a little bit. On average, I should have been running at around the pace of a slow jog.

I had once heard that a person's casual walking speed was roughly 4kmph. Running would normally double that, and so on. In a book that I had once read, if you were to walk at slower than 4mph, you were punished.[7] Unfortunately, the exact conversion from kilometers to miles was hazy at best in my head, so I couldn't use

[7] This is a reference to Stephen King's *The Long Walk.*

that as a reference. Anyways, let's just assume that it was somewhere in-between a stroll and a fast run. 6kmph. Ibara was probably running more earnestly than the average, so I decided on 7kmph. From there, I had to figure out how many kilometers were between me and Ibara, who had started six minutes prior. That meant the answer was…

The answer was…

Multiplications and divisions ran circles inside my head. It wasn't like I had exceptionally bad grades in math, and the calculations weren't all that extreme with this one. It's just that doing all of the math in your head and doing it with paper and a pen required different skills altogether. Add onto that the fact that I was running, and my head just couldn't function like it usually could. Taking time while I was trying to figure out the answer was unavoidable. As I made excuses one after another, I kneaded the all the distances, times, and speeds into the formula in my head.

Let's see. In around one minute, one would probably near about 17 meters or so. She would catch up to me at around 4.1km from the start then. That meant that the approximate distance between us was… Well, she probably wasn't that far back anyways.

Even though I didn't have enough time nor distance in the first place, in order to calculate how much of each I had left, I ended up using more of both in the process. Talk about lacking foresight. I had two possible ways to reclaim the lost time and distance.

The first one was to try running a bit more seriously.

And my second option was to try remembering what happened that day all the more quickly.

That day, if I recall correctly, was just like today. I'm pretty sure it was fairly clear out.

It was certainly colder, however.

2. Past: 42 Days Ago

The Friday that fell on the very last day of the new student recruitment week was often called the New Recruit Festival. It was apparently called this not because anyone in particular named it such, but because it was simply more convenient to say.

The new student recruitment itself, however, lasted all throughout the entire week.

From Monday onwards, the new students gathered in the gymnasium after school and sat through several orientations. On Monday was the student council's presentation. After that came the important school committees. From Tuesday on, the various clubs took turns getting on stage to show the various first-years just how fantastic they were. Anyways, there were a considerable number of groups, so the orientations were held over a period of four days.

The same sort of thing happened last year as well, but I wasn't interested in being solicited, so I left early. Now that I'm on the soliciting side this year, however, I thought I should probably do at least a little enemy reconnaissance. On Tuesday, Chitanda grabbed me and we did a little spying in the gym.

Each group was allotted five minutes to present. In that time, the Theater Club put on a skit, the Clothing Research Society put on a fashion show, the Choir and Acapella clubs showcased the musical differences between the two of them, and the Track-and-Field Sports Club brought in a mat to demonstrate running high jumps.

There were also clubs clearly at a disadvantage. Not only did the Divination Research Society only have one member, that one member didn't like showing off at all. With a quiet voice, she gave a

brief explanation on the history of the Kabbalah and then quickly put down the mic and left. The Cooking Research Society similarly had their own disadvantages. It's not like you can instantly start preparing something the second you get on the stage. They could only really tell the first-years to come visit them at their table during the end-of-the-week New Recruit Festival because they would treat everyone to their mountain-herb cooking there. The Go Club played a game for the audience, but it was a failure no matter how you looked at it. They didn't have a large demonstration board, so the audience couldn't even see where they were placing the stones. It would have been fine if they had someone reading the moves out loud, but apparently there were only two people in the club. It was like time had frozen in place, desperately wanting to run away.

But this wasn't the time nor place to be feeling sorry for the Go Club. Five minutes was an unexpectedly long amount of time.

The Classics Club was scheduled to present on Thursday. Because they were still sorting things out after becoming second-years, Satoshi and Ibara were often busy so they didn't show up to the clubroom for the most part. On Wednesday, however, everyone happened to be gathered.

"What are we doing?"

Within my question was not only me wondering how we should fill our five minute timeslot, but me wondering if we were even capable of doing something like that in the first place.

"For now let's just try our hardest," responded Ibara with a voice clearly suggesting she wasn't going to try her hardest.

"I agree, let's try our hardest," I retorted in like.

As I said this, however, she replied, “Try our hardest on what?”

How would I know? You were the one that said it first.

“Well as it goes, I’m the club president, so technically speaking I should probably be the one to give a speech that could explain what makes the Classics Club attractive, but…”

Chitanda was also being evasive. Judging by the way she hesitated while saying that sentence, she was, without a doubt, unable to think of any attractive points. That wasn’t all.

“Chitanda, even if you were to go onstage to try to sell up the Classics Club, I don’t think anyone would come.”

“Are you serious? Try looking in a mirror next time you say something like that.”

“No, it’s fine,” said Chitanda to the hostile Ibara. “I know I’m not good at asking people for favors.”

Chitanda had a strong will and limitless amounts of sincerity, but on the other hand, because that will of hers was so one-sided, she didn't have it in her to use cunning tricks. If we had the materials needed to convince them gathered here, Chitanda’s way of doing things might’ve worked, but unfortunately, our hand was empty.

That being said, Ibara was right about me needing to look in the mirror. If I were the one pushed out to face the first-years, I would doubtlessly only be able to say something along the lines of “We don’t really do anything, but we do have a clubroom, so if you could stop on by, that’d be wonderful.”

However, I still had reservations about getting Ibara to do it.

"Chi-chan, I've never thought you were bad at it. If it were me doing it, I'd only end up saying something unnecessary."

It appears the party in question also understood this.

At this point, there was only one person left.

Satoshi showed a troubled look on his face, but his eyes were clearly smiling.

"I wonder if I'm the right person for the job. If there are no other suggestions and you absolutely need me, however, I suppose I could do it to kill some time."

With that, it became Satoshi's time to shine.

"If everyone is happy with our Thursday plans, you guys should start deciding on what you're going to do on Friday. After all, if you plan on using fire or gas, you'll need to turn in a request slip by tomorrow."

Satoshi said this in his official General Committee voice and then stood up. I hadn't known he had been chosen as the General Committee vice-president and was busy as a result of that until later.

And then came Thursday after school. Satoshi Fukube stood on the gym stage as the sole Classics Club representative and let loose a variety of clever, apt one-liners, like "On the way here, I heard a lot of sawing noises coming from the Construction Club, but no matter how hard I looked, I couldn't *see* a thing. Classics Club, everyone."[8] His appropriate humor invited a good number of laughs from the first-years, and his flawlessly delivered speech wrapped up

[8] I had to change up the pun.

perfectly in four minutes and thirty seconds. He received a sparse applause and then exited the stage as the Abacus Calculation Club came on next.[9]

Even now, I admired my old friend's remarkable gift.

After all, Satoshi's speech had almost nothing to do with the actual Classics Club. Even though there was nothing to talk about, he splendidly filled the desired timeslot. That in itself was a spectacular ability, and one that I could never hope to imitate.

And then Friday rolled around. The sky was very clear.

In front of the Kamiyama High School building, in the garden or roundabout (or whatever you called it), there were several spaces dotted with shrubs. During lunch break, each of the clubs and committees had set up tables there. Because of the scattered bushes, the tables couldn't be set up in a straight line, and as a result, the tables on both sides curved around in any number of offshoots.

I came to set up for the Classics Club. Satoshi was busy with General Committee work, and as much as I believed in my motto, "if I don't need to do something, I won't," I didn't feel like pushing all of the manual labor onto Ibara and Chitanda. I carried out the table and folding chairs and then lunch break ended. During afternoon classes, I was able to see the venue I set up from the window, but the dozens of tables lined up made the front gardens seem something like mysterious maze.

[9] This is an actual type of club.

Before the bell that signaled classes were over chimed, my class, 2-A, started becoming restless. I heard various whispers coming from all directions.

“How are the preparations going?”

“Before anything else, we have to start with this.”

…and other things of that nature. A particularly hasty student put on an armband reading “Certain Victory!” while he was still in the class. Another one placed a stuffed bear on his desk. I couldn’t even begin to guess what clubs these people where in, but I did understand the rush, though. If you were too late to catch the first-years before they left, all of that preparation would have been for nothing. A running start was crucial.

The bell rang, and classes ended. All of my classmates immediately flew out the door like a cascading avalanche. Most likely, this scene was the same in all of the second and third-year classrooms. Although a little reluctant, I ended up joining the end of the avalanche anyways.

The garden that was at one point solely occupied by a line of empty tables was now overwhelmingly covered with various posters, signboards, and handouts. Even at a quick glance, I saw things reading: “Visit the Chemistry Club! May our future relations combust!” “Willing to bet your youth? Damn straight, the Basketball Club is for you!” “Enjoy creating it, and then have fun wearing it! Clothing Research Society.” “The Han Dynasty hath

fallen, and the History Research Club shall be joineth!"[10] "One more person and we'll have eleven! Join the Soccer Club." The Cheering Squad held a group flag, the Cheerleading Club formed a large circle, the smell of black tea began to drift from the Confectionery Research Society, the Tea Ceremony Club had diligently laid out an outdoor mat, and a bunch of people with headbands had gathered who were, if I remembered correctly, part of the Broadcasting Club. Not even ten minutes had passed since the school bell rang, and already this much pandemonium had broken loose.

All of this had started at 3:30, and it was scheduled to be completely taken down once it had reached 6:00. This roughly two-hour long madness was commonly known as the New Recruit Festival. The fact that the "recruit" in the name didn't mean "warmly invite" but rather "solicit by any means necessary" was something very typical of this school, indeed.

Most clubs had a single standard table, but depending on member count, popularity, and some invisible political element, there were other clubs that had one of the several large ones. Of course, it was decided beforehand which clubs would get them. The Classics Club had the number 17 table, so as I wandered around, searching for it, Chitanda called out to me, "Oreki-san, over here."

I wasn't looking forward to it that much, but as expected, our table was placed in a small corner of the venue. On it sat a small cardboard sign reading "Classics Club." While the writing was elegant, it also felt unreservedly warm. Without a sign, no one

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[10] This is a play on words. The original line (蒼天已死 黄天当立) comes from the Chinese *Records of the Three Kingdoms*, and it generally refers to the predicted downfall of the Han Dynasty and success of the Yellow Scarves Rebellion. For more information: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yellow_Turban_Rebellion

would be able to tell what kind of club we were trying to get them to join, but we hadn't mentioned doing this kind of preparation. Possibly reading my expression, Chitanda gave a slightly conflicted laugh.

"I put it together during lunch break. I probably should have made it a bit cuter, but I didn't think of that at the time."

That meant this was Chitanda's handwriting. I thought she'd normally write in a more textbook fashion, but her brushwork was surprisingly carefree. Just as she had mentioned, however, it wasn't cute in the slightest. It might've been nice if Ibara had drawn a little figure on it, but hindsight's 20/20.

Chitanda wore a black coat as she sat on the folding chair. The front wasn't buttoned, so her white sweater and tie peeked through. I was also wearing a white trench coat. The New Recruit Festival around us had plenty of burning passion, but even then, it was still abnormally cold for April. Looking around, almost all of the recruiters and the recruited students wore thick overclothes.

Next to the Classics Club were the Ink Painting and Karuta clubs. Each of them only had one person stationed there. I gave vague greetings, and squeezed through them. I then sat next to Chitanda, directly in the center of the "Classics Club" sign.

Satoshi wouldn't be coming this time. He was busy with General Committee work, so it couldn't be helped. Then Chitanda spoke up.

"I guess Mayaka-san won't be coming after all."

"Manga Society?"

"I think that's the case, but it's not like she's going to be at their booth necessarily."

I remained quiet and nodded. I heard that Ibara's position in the Manga Research Society had become somewhat delicate. It was probably becoming difficult for her to even look the rest of them in the face. At any rate, we'd run into some problems if Ibara ended up coming now. Although I thought it was pretty big when I was carrying it earlier, looking at it now, the table we got wasn't nearly as big as the larger ones.

More precisely, it was really small.

With just the two of us sitting side-by-side, it was already getting a little hard to breathe. Had Chitanda been a little considerate in moving to give me some breathing room I would have been quite comfortable, but unfortunately, she had a peculiar understanding regarding personal space, so the fact that we were close enough for our shoulders to be touching didn't bother her in the slightest.

I took a small breath. Let's just play it cool. I wasn't the only one that thought it was cramped. Just in my field of vision, for example, I could see the Photography Club and Global Act Club squeezed far too closely together, and we all had to start advertising our club whilst buried in this mess.

At any rate, I had to start doing something to catch the attention of the passing first-years.

With interested expressions that were still clearly intimidated by the presence of their seniors and faces that still betrayed their middle-school roots, the first-years came little by little. At that moment, I could've sworn that I heard the sound of people licking their lips, thinking their prey had finally arrived. Fake, luring smiles filled the New Recruit Festival grounds.

The Classics Club couldn't afford to lose either. Now, now, come on up ladies and gentlemen. Come forward, anyone with a little time to spare. If you would like to join the fantastic Classics Club, the reception table is right over here.

After five minutes, I became bored.

No one was even stopping at our table.

"I said I was going to catch us some first-years, but how do I even do that in the first place," I grumbled as I stared at the new students passing by. Chitanda sat upright, her hands resting on her thighs, and without looking at me she responded.

"If only we had some birdlime, this would be simple."[11]

I knew roughly what birdlime was, but I had never seen it before. At most, it's something like a bug net, right?

"Wouldn't a bird net be more efficient?"

"Possibly, but it's illegal."

"I don't think anyone will find out."

"Oreki-san, are you the kind of person that ignores a red signal in the middle of the night?"

"I'm the kind of person that doesn't go out on walks in the middle of the night, period."

The conversation was so unproductive that it put even me in a miserable mood.

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[11] Birdlime is an adhesive that traps birds that land on it.

“You strike me as the type that would stop at that red light.”

“There are no traffic signals where I take my midnight strolls.”

It was so incredible unproductive.

I assumed something like this would happen, so I took out the book hidden in my coat pocket. I started reading the short story collection, and then spoke to Chitanda who continued to face forward exactly as a receptionist might.

“We have nothing to do, so I’m going to be reading.”

As I said this, Chitanda finally turned to face me, and with a soft smile she said, “That won’t do.”

“But no one’s coming.”

“That won’t do. Please just sit here quietly.”

Understood. I returned the book to my pocket. Thinking about it, if I were reading a book on the side like I had no interest in the festival, I guess new students would find it difficult to approach the table. On the other hand, if I were to remain sitting like this until evening, it would just get colder and colder. I crossed my hands behind my head.

Chitanda also looked like she had way too much time on her hands. No matter how strong her sense of responsibility was, she wasn’t an inanimate object, so we should probably leave if nothing continued to happen. She turned her head to the side and seemed to be watching an excited student from another club with interest.

People continued to flow by. For some reason, as I watched this progression, I spoke.

“Cursed spots really do exist.”

“Yes, they do.”

She replied immediately. I didn’t know what to say in response.

A little while later, Chitanda turned to me and tilted her head.

“That’s not what you were talking about?”

What exactly was ‘that’ referring to? I decided to not think about it too hard and leaned back into my folding chair.

“You know, one of those. In something like a shopping district or roadside area, even though it doesn’t look like it’s in a bad location compared to the other shops, you have a store that is constantly being destroyed and replaced by a new one. Before you realize it, there’s a new shop there, and no matter what kind of shop it is, it never gets any business. I was just thinking that spots like those really existed.”

“Ah, I see. A place that's constantly changing ownership. It’s mysterious, but once they change the signboard, I can never seem to remember what kind of shop it was previously.”

“That’s true, isn’t it? When it becomes a vacant lot, you end up even forgetting if there was a shop there in the first place.”

Chitanda nodded and her expression begged me to continue. I wanted to avoid her eyes so I slightly averted my face. As if to bring attention away from that, I lightly tapped the table with the back of my hand.

“I’m getting the same vibes here.”

“By ‘here’, do you mean this area?”

"Yeah."

One section of the row of tables was placed in an area surrounded by ring of hedges. According to the General Committee's official statement, the Classics Club was to be one of the clubs stationed in that clearing, however, I had been watching the path that the students had been taking since earlier, and things weren't looking good.

When the first-years entered the ring, their backs were turned to us. If students weren't interested in what was going on and decided to continue through to the school gates, they wouldn't even see us once, however, if one was curious, if even for a little bit, and they decided to look around, they would naturally end up directly in front of our table. Judging solely by the flow of traffic, this spot shouldn't leave a bad impression at all.

And yet, for some reason none of the first-years were even so much as stopping in front of it. They wouldn't even look at Chitanda's handwritten Classics Club sign.

"Doesn't it feel like people are finding it hard to stop walking around here for some reason?"

As Chitanda watched the group passing in front of us, she slowly responded.

"I think the biggest problem is that we aren't calling out to them."

Loud voices from every club were intersecting each other in the air all throughout the front gardens. "Hey, you look like a quiz kind of guy. I'm sure you're searching for a quiz even as we speak. I feel you. Well then, first question!" "We also host English debates. Your English grade will certainly rise; it normally does." "No no, I'll start

from the rules. It's easy if you memorize them. If you just pay attention to where "gold" and "silver" are, you'll be fine!"[12] "Are you bad at cooking? It's fine if you are, because you'll only get better in the Cooking Society. Come to our clubroom now and we'll make you something right away!" "Astronomy Club, Astronomy club over here! Do you like stars? Love planets? Although technically we can't see them right now." I had just realized it, but even the singularly manned Ink Painting Club and Karuta Club were calling out to the passing students.

Certainly enough, staying quiet and then complaining that 'no one was stopping' seemed pretty irrational.

At the same time, however, Chitanda then said this.

"Although, with 'that' thing right in front of us, it does seem a little unfair."

While saying this, she indicated what she was talking about with her eyes.

'That' was putting on a huge exhibition in front of the students passing along the path. A large banner read "Ready for Tea Time." It was an exquisite banner with cat and panda mascots embroidered on it with beads. A black tea fragrance wafted from it. On the table were a Thermos, two stacks of paper cups, a club entry form, and a pen. On one end of the table were also a tabletop gas stove and a golden kettle, the type that a sports team might drink from during a match. That shining kettle looked as if it could carry an impressive 10 liters. At the moment, the stove wasn't turned on.

[12] "Gold" and "silver" here refer to pieces from Shogi, a Japanese version of chess.

And the thing that stood out the most was the pumpkin on the opposite side from the gas stove. This utterly massive thing had eyes and a mouth carved into it to turn it into a Halloween decoration. Did Halloween take place in April?

In the center behind the table were two girls. Both of them wore only aprons over their school uniforms. Even though that was the case, they were so enthusiastic that it seemed like the cold hadn't even reached them. Sandwiched in-between the pumpkin and gas stove, they vigorously waved their arms around.

"Come and have a bite. Cookies you'll be sure to love! Great, here you go!"

"The thing is, we put a mysterious concoction inside these cookies. Now you've fallen into our trap. You want to join the club now. See, you really want to join. You want to join so badly that you can't stand it anymore. The registration sheet is right over here."

"Yes, this is that kind of cookie. I'd be bad if it got stuck in your throat, so drink some of this here black tea."

As she said this, she picked up the Thermos and poured the tea into a paper cup.

"Hey you, you over there. You look like the type who loves cookies!"

"Ah, you're right! He does have a face perfectly suited towards eating cookies. Now eat up. It doesn't matter why, just eat it!"

Somehow I felt like I'd met those two before. What was it, I wonder. I don't think I've seen their faces before.

It seemed like they had a lot of cookies prepared. They were giving them out one after another. I didn't know whether or not their plan was actually succeeding in getting people to sign up, but they were certainly getting a lot of students to stop.

"The Confectionery Research Society, huh?"

"Yes, you can't help but look over there, completely forgetting about the Classics Club."

Using food to lure the new students in, what a dastardly pair. At any rate, those who would let their hearts be stolen over something like a cookie were probably frivolous people anyways. They wouldn't make good additions to the Classics Club. As I was playing around in my head with my baseless accusations and "we are the chosen few" rhetoric, I noticed Chitanda seemed a bit strange next to me. She was staring intently at the busy Confectionery Research Society table without so much as twitching.

No way... I called to her with fear in my voice.

"Chitanda?"

"Huh… oh, what is it?"

The startled Chitanda turned towards me, and I asked her a question.

"Is it possible…"

"Yes?"

"…you want a cookie?"

Chitanda thought a bit and then replied with an earnest expression.

"If I said no, I would be lying."

“It’s fine if you go and get one.”

“Thank you very much, but I can’t. We have other priorities.”

One again, she turned her head to stare at the Confectionery Research Society.

“Isn’t there something strange going on over there?”

Caught in her trap, I ended up looking once more myself. The energetic duo. The Thermos, paper cups, and club entry sheet. The tabletop gas stove, pumpkin, and cookies.

…Well I couldn’t deny that there were certainly strange things going on with their choices in presentation. The strangest thing there was probably how lively the two were.

Other than those, maybe there were one or two more weird aspects.

“I guess you’re right. It is odd.”

I was careless to let that slip out. Chitanda suddenly turned towards me. Because the table was so small, when she did, I could feel her so close to me that I instantly jumped back without thinking.

“Really? Which parts are odd?”

“What do you mean ‘which parts’? You were the one that said it first, weren't you? It just is.”

Or perhaps she was playing some sort of high-level mind game with me, saying that “it was strange in a way that only the Confectionery Research Club could be.”[13]

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[13] In Japanese, the word for strange, *okashii*, sounds almost identical to a word meaning confections, *okashi*.

Chitanda casted a sidelong glance at the commotion surrounding the cookie distribution and then whispered something in response.

"I know, but the thing is ever since a while back I can't help but feel like something strange is going on. I have these thoughts, and it's so frustrating."

"Oh, that's probably just…"

"Please wait!"

I stopped speaking and swallowed the words before they came out.

"Please don't tell me yet. I'm still trying to figure out the answer. Yes, I feel like I understand it somewhat."

I've been asked plenty of times to give an answer, but I have never been told to not give one before. While I was considering how rare this was, I stared at the side of Chitanda's close face as she stared at the Confectionery Society in turn.

At last, she looked resolute.

"It's the pumpkin. I have a feeling that the pumpkin is off."

The orange pumpkin had two triangular eyes and a jagged mouth cut into it. No matter how you looked at it, it was your standard, run-of-the-mill Jack O'Lantern, but I could understand why it might have attracted one's eyes to such an extent.

Chitanda, however, pursued a different line of thought.

"Goods along those lines aren't authorized in Japan… No, that's wrong. That's just a normal variety of pumpkin seed."

"Is that so?"

“Pumpkins are grown in the fall, but I guess if they were stored properly, it wouldn’t be strange that they didn’t rot.”

“I see.”

“They aren’t being widely sold as a commercial crop yet. I don’t think there are any farming families growing them in Kamiyama City.”

“I’m shocked.”

“But you can buy them normally at the supermarket. Is it domestically-produced? Or perhaps it’s an imported variety.”

“Why are you looking at it from an agricultural perspective!?”

That part wasn’t the problem. As she continued to miss the point so splendidly every time, I began to feel like remaining silent was an evil deed in itself.

Chitanda whispered a couple more things to herself, but finally let out a small sigh.

“I guess everything up until now was wrong. I have no idea. I give up. Why am I so curious about that pumpkin?”

She became bashful, as if apologizing for her previous obstinacy.

“I’m curious.”

Normally I would have thought this kind of thing was a nuisance.

After all, Chitanda’s limitless curiosity had brought about a similarly limitless number of nuisances to not only the Classics Club, but to this energy-saving advocate right here as well.

Thinking rationally about it, even had I not resolved a large majority of these, it's not like I would be any worse off than I was now, and yet, even I didn't really understand why I ended up sticking around all the way to the end in most of these cases. I think Chitanda's large eyes were to blame.

However today, as Chitanda said she was curious at that moment in this very spot, I didn't find it all that annoying. After all, sitting behind this table, I wasn't allowed to read a book nor get up and leave. If I was only going to be sitting at this table anyways, I figured having a discussion wouldn't be bad.

At the same time, I had already mostly understood the true identity of the thing that had caused Chitanda to have a 'feeling that something was off.' It didn't look like this discussion would last for very long. I started speaking.

"That pumpkin is pretty big, isn't it."

Chitanda tilted her head.

"Well it's a *Cucurbita pepo* variety, so it actually isn't that big in compari…"[14]

Her tone suddenly shifted.

"You could probably just barely fit your arms around it, right? At the very least, it's considerably larger than the cardboard you used to make the Classics Club sign."

She looked at the sign, and then finally nodded in assent.

"That's correct. It's much larger."

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[14] One of the most common pumpkin varieties.

“That pumpkin was placed on one side of the table, and on the other side is the tabletop gas stove, and yet, between them are two Confectionery Society members jumping around and handing out cookies. At our table are just the two of us sitting side by side, and it’s already this cramped.”

“Really? Is it that cramped?”

Just as I thought, she didn’t think so at all.

Let's just put that aside for now. Because we were watching the table from a gap in the passing flood of students, and its orientation was somewhat diagonal when compared to ours, it was probably difficult for her to gauge distance. The answer to Chitanda’s question was actually very simple.

“The Confectionery Society’s table is bigger than ours. When I was setting up our table earlier, I noticed there were several clubs using extra-large ones. You didn’t know the tables came in different sizes. Isn’t that why you felt a strange sense of discomfort?”

“Ah…”

Chitanda’s voice leaked out.

However, her face wasn’t glowing.

“Their table is extra-large. You can figure that out from the distance between the pumpkin and gas burner. I see. Just like you mentioned, I hadn’t noticed that. But I have a feeling that it’s something else. …In that case, why do they have a pumpkin there?”

And now we arrived at the ‘why’. It was a difficult question.

“Does there have to a reason in using decorations? Handing out cookies while using a Halloween theme makes a certain amount of sense, doesn’t it?”

Even though it was completely out of season.

Chitanda returned to look at the Confectionery Society.

“Let me change my phrasing a bit. If they didn’t have the pumpkin there, what would happen?”

As she asked that, I tried imagining it. What would happen if you took away the pumpkin, and the table only had a tabletop gas stove and kettle.

“The table would look fairly open and spacious.”

“I agree.”

She then turned towards me and started speaking slowly, as if emphasizing the point.

“If that pumpkin wasn’t there, don’t you think the Confectionery Society would be able to do so much more with all the space?”

I felt like I understood what she was getting at.

Considering the pumpkin was solely being used as a decoration, the Confectionery Society was limiting the amount of space they had. And yet, even though they had done that, it didn’t look like they were cramped at all.

This meant that they had an excessive amount of table space. To think they were even assigned an extra-large table in the first place.

“So are you saying that them having the extra-large table is a waste?”

Chitanda shook her head slightly.

"That's not what I'm saying. It's just that they seem to be using the same amount of space that we are at our smaller table. In that case, why were they assigned an extra-large table?"

The General Committee was responsible for divvying up all of the spots. Naturally, they also decided which clubs got to use the extra-large tables. For example, if a physically bulky club like the Brass Band Club was given an extra-large table, no one would think twice. Yet, the Confectionery Society didn't take up a lot of space. Even at the moment, there were only two there advertising.

I could think of several reasons aside from that, however, that might explain it.

"Possibility one: There were a lot of extra-large tables, and all of the clubs that actually needed them got one, so there was a surplus. As a result, even the Confectionery Society was given one."

"Do you really think so?"

Hearing such an earnest response to my half-assed theory almost made me choke on my words.

"Not really..."

"I don't think so either. If that were there case, it'd be unfair to the clearly-troubled Photography Club and Flower Arrangement Club over there."

I could see the Photography Club completely drowning in their photos with not enough room to put all of them, but the Flower Arrangement Club that Chitanda pointed out as well was in an even worse position. Because they lined up a row of showy flower

arrangements on their table, the final result resembled something more akin to a densely packed jungle as opposed to a collection of floral pieces, and on top of that, you couldn't even see the club members' faces. They had probably brought one arrangement per person without thinking about it and quickly ran out of room. Besides, I had basically known there was no surplus in the first place.

Extra-large tables are distributed among the clubs that have a lot of showpieces to exhibit, while the Confectionery Society puts up with a normal-sized one. This is what normally should have happened. So why didn't it?

"Possibility two: The Confectionery Society has pull with the General Committee, and they bribed these connections to make off with an extra-large table."

Recruiting the new students was a matter of survival of the fittest; it was accepted that those who haphazardly approached the event without a plan of attack were morons. For a little while after, Chitanda had a sad look in her eyes. Was she despairing over the cruelty behind this cold calculation? In the end, however, she finally replied.

"So after doing that and making off with the extra-large table, those two…"

"Put a big pumpkin on it."

No, that was wrong. There was a fundamental contradiction in that. If they didn't have a way to effectively use that extra space, there wouldn't even be a reason to pull so many strings to get one in the first place.

If I assume they went after one deliberately, then it was possible that they were using the extra-large table not because they needed it, but because it put the clubs that would need it at a disadvantage. By this hypothesis, the Confectionery Society secured the extra-large table simply to harass the other clubs. It wasn't like that couldn't be the case, but the realm of possibility is often far separated from that of reality. I didn't believe they would go that far, and I don't think Chitanda would either.

"Let's just put that one aside for now. Time for possibility three."

Deep, down inside, I thought that this one was the correct answer. Listing the other two before it was… well… me just killing time really.

It took a little bit for me to find the words.

"The Confectionery Society filled out a request to use a particular device, and they were given an extra-large table because they needed the space for safety purposes as a result."

"What device would that be?"

There was something that you needed to get special permission for.

"Fire. The tabletop gas stove."

Upon hearing this, Chitanda turned her head and once again looked over towards the Confectionery Society.

"The Confectionery Society was given an extra-long table in order to use that. It's dangerous to use fire in a narrow space, after all. However, the table was much too large with only the gas stove at the end. As a result, they added the pumpkin to the other end of the

table in order to achieve a nice, pleasant balance. Doesn't this sound correct to you?"

With this, I was sure I solved the mystery behind the pumpkin. It took a little more than I thought it would, but Chitanda was sure to be satisfied with this.

How naïve I was. Chitanda continued to stare intently at the Confectionery Society table, as well at its ever-energetic club members handing around cookies and black tea.

After an anxiety-inducing period of silence, Chitanda slowly turned towards me.

"I see. I wish I could call it a fantastic deduction, however…"

I also started looking at the thing Chitanda was staring at in particular. A Thermos. Paper cups. A tabletop gas stove and kettle.

"The gas stove isn't being used."

Certainly enough, the fire wasn't lit at the moment. You could figure that out just by looking.

But even that being the case, Chitanda's point didn't make any sense.

"What are you saying? Just because they aren't using it at the moment doesn't mean they won't be using it later."

Currently, they were pouring tea from the Thermos, however, if they continued to distribute it, they would eventually run out. When that happened, they would certainly use the gas stove to heat up more. Even a kindergartner could figure that out.

Chitanda suddenly moved her face close to mine. I looked up and our eyes met. It was like her pupils penetrated all the way through to the bottommost areas of my heart.

"Oreki-san, you were thinking that I was dumb just now, weren't you."

"I wouldn't say…"

"Then, were you thinking I was an idiot?"

I was thinking it was logic that even a kindergartner would understand.

Chitanda leaned back in her chair and started talking in a miffed tone.

"It's not like I say things without thinking beforehand. I figured it out when I was looking really carefully at the table."

Chitanda had an impressive sense of vision, hearing, and smell. Her taste was probably similar. Perhaps she had caught on to something that I didn't notice as a result of those five senses.

"What did you see?"

"Nothing that you can't."

She probably wasn't sulking. She was issuing me a challenge. *Damn you*, I thought and then strained my eyes to look for something.

I guess I couldn't say that there was nothing suspicious.

"That kettle looks brand-new. It doesn't look like it's been used over a fire even once yet."

In saying that, however, there was no way to tell if it hadn't actually been used before just from that observation. I snuck a quick glance at Chitanda, and I could see her cracking a small smile without looking like she was going to say anything anytime soon. …Which probably meant that wasn't it.

"The Confectionery Society is giving out black tea. They are pouring it out of the Thermos into the paper cups. Once they run out, they'll have to boil more, of course."

Wait a second, that's incorrect. You don't boil black tea.

Ah, so that's what it was. Even if the Confectionery Society was really boiling water over there, was there really anything they could do with just that?

"I understand now. You were talking about the black tea, right?"

"Exactly," she replied, seemingly puffing out her chest with pride. "The Confectionery Society is handing out cookies and black tea. Even if they decided to boil some water, there'd be no point if they didn't have the tea leaves, and yet, I haven't seen these tea leaves anywhere on their table. They must have previously brewed the tea somewhere else and then poured it into the Thermos."

Although I constantly recognized her incredible senses, there were few times when I thought her insight was similarly extraordinary. I wasn't feeling down at being bested by her, but I retorted with a stingy counter anyways.

"Maybe the black tea base is already in the Thermos. All they needed to do would be directly add the boiling water and it would turn into black tea. Or maybe the leaves were in the kettle…"

As I finished saying this, Chitanda's eyes became wide.

“Oreki-san… don’t tell me you’ve never brewed black tea before?”

I remained silent.

That was exactly the case. I preferred coffee much more, but even when I did drink black tea, it would always be some that I got from a vending machine. As a result, I had never once had the need to brew it for myself. It almost felt like me admitting to my life’s pathetic nature however, so I didn’t want to say that out loud.

“If you were to do that, the tea would get more and more bitter. That’s why it’s made in teapots with removable strainers and why the tea leaf packages themselves have recommended amounts for single use. For example, even if you were to use a tea bag, you’d normally take out the bag after a certain amount of time had passed.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes it is.”

So that’s how it all worked. I wasn’t very knowledgeable about the whole thing, but I could at least understand that there was something wrong with the fact that they didn’t have tea leaves nor a pot used to brew the tea in.

This meant that the black tea that they had already prepared in their Thermos was all they had, and that the gas stove wasn’t there to make more.

Things were becoming increasingly bizarre.

“I guess this means that the Confectionery Society wasn’t planning on using the gas stove that they prepared from the very start. In that case it’s just like the pumpkin; at this point it's just a decoration.”

I thought for a bit.

“Even if they aren’t using it, I still think my hypothesis about them being assigned an extra-large table after applying for permission to use the gas stove was correct. The strange part is how they don’t seem to have a use for it. What does that mean, then?”

“What, indeed.”

Unexpectedly, this was starting to become a hassle. I went along with it at first just to kill some time, but to think it would drag on for this long. Incidentally, as I was being pursued by this anxiety, I turned away from Chitanda. She also averted her eyes at the same time.

We then both noticed a person standing in front of us.

Skin tanned under the cloudy skies that persisted even in spring. Hair cut short. A face and countenance that suggested a lively, gallant nature. A thick jacket that would have hidden the sex of its wearer had it not been unfastened, showing the sweater and tie underneath. At essentially the same time, Chitanda and I saw a girl standing before us. It wasn’t like I forgot we were in the middle of the New Recruit Festival, but I didn’t think anyone would actually come to our table. How long had she been standing there?

As the two of us sat there dumbfounded and unable to speak, the girl stuck her hands into her jacket pockets and slightly bowed her head.

“Hi there.”

She then flashed a beaming smile.

Chitanda was the first to come to her senses.

“O… oh, um, are you perhaps interested in joining? My name is Chitanda. I’m the club president.”

The girl in the jacket continued to smile as she responded.

“Not necessarily, but I was walking around and looking at the clubs, and I finally saw you guys looking like you were talking about something interesting over here. My name’s Ōhinata. I’m a first-year.”

It was my first time hearing the name. It wasn’t as rare as the name “Chitanda,” but it was still very peculiar, so I had I feeling I wouldn’t forget it. Even that was already out of character for me. I wasn’t normally good at remembering things like names and faces after all.

And yet, it felt like I had seen her face somewhere before. There could only be one reason for me knowing a first-year’s face.

“Kaburaya Middle School?”

Ōhinata looked at me and smiled as if she were extremely happy.

“Yes,” she nodded. She was a very straightforward person.

“I see.”

Just like I thought, she was once an underclassman of mine. I figured I should say something about Kaburaya Middle School, but there wasn’t really anything I wanted to ask or talk about, so I stayed silent.

Chitanda started to speak from the side.

“Well, we are recruiting at the moment, so how about it? Over at the Classics Club we do… various things.”

Well put.

“I don’t know, it seems kind of complicated. You guys read stuff like classical Chinese literature, right? I mean I guess I do like Japanese studies and all…”

“No, we don’t do those kinds of things. Of course, if you would like to we could.”

“Is that so? Still though…”

I didn’t know if Ōhinata had heard something up in the sky somewhere, but she suddenly stooped over and brought her face close to Chitanda’s.

“This is just something a friend told me, but people should finish the things they start. So? What’s up with the pumpkin after all?”

“Wha…?”

I see. So she was eavesdropping on us, huh?

“From which part did you start listening?”

“Umm,” she thought as she pursed her lips from side to side, “From the part where you told her she could go and get some cookies if she wanted to.”

“That’s basically from the beginning!”

Chitanda let out something like a yell. Her cheeks were becoming visibly flushed.

“You heard everything? That’s so embarrassing.”

Could you really call a conversation like that embarrassing?

It was such an unexpected reaction that it caused even Ōhinata to falter.

"Um, I'm sorry. I really didn't mean to overhear it all. It's just that… I just got really curious about the pumpkin when I heard you guys talking about it, so I kind of just stopped walking and it went from there. I couldn't help but wonder how much you guys were going to think about the pumpkin, is all."

She quickly lowered her head.

"I'm really sorry."

"No… It's fine."

As Chitanda said this, she brought her hand up to her mouth like she was about to cough. Ōhinata also had an embarrassed expression for a little while after, but she quickly reverted to her original self.

"So? What's up with the pumpkin?"

Chitanda aside, why was this first-year's curiosity so fired up about something like that as well. As I thought this, however, I figured I'd just continue anyways and ignore the new element. I recalled the point where we had left off.

"If I remember correctly, we were talking about the gas stove being unused.

"The reason they have the space to use a pumpkin as decoration is because they have an extra-large table.

“The reason they were assigned an extra-large table was because they filed a form asking to use a gas stove.

“However, in reality, they aren’t using the gas stove. Something’s fishy. We left off right around there.”

I looked to Chitanda as I said this, but she only casted her eyes downwards without responding. It looked like she was really embarrassed after all. Ever since Chitanda joined the club, she’s been bringing troublesome things behind her one after another, and yet this was the first time I had ever seen her like this. What was she so conscious about?

“So how about this then?” Ōhinata asked with a voice that sounded like it was competing with the surrounding ruckus. “Those guys had initially planned on using the gas stove for a reason that was unrelated to brewing black tea, but later their plans changed, and they ended up not needing it. More importantly than its use, however, was the fact that they felt they had to put the gas stove on the table even though they weren’t going to use it.”

“Interesting.”

She must have really payed attention to our conversation if she could already make these kinds of deductions. Although, that’s not to say they were correct.

“However it should have been decided long ago that they were going to distribute black tea and confections. At any rate, it’s not like they suddenly decided on it today. It’s a bit inconsistent to assume that they had long decided on handing out tea and confections while also having plans to use a gas stove for a different purpose.”

“We don’t necessarily know that’s the case, do we? If they had the ingredients and tea on hand, wouldn’t they be able to make them in time even had they decided on it today? If they started in the morning, wouldn’t they be able to finish by the afternoon?”

It’s true that the Confectionery Society would most likely have the cookie ingredients ready to go if they needed them. That wasn’t the problem, though. I raised my arm and pointed towards the item in question.

“That’s true about the cookies, however the banner isn’t really something you could make in the same amount of time.”

The large banner that read “Ready for Tea Time” was embroidered with a ton of beads. It would be extremely difficult to sew that entire thing between classes.

“They had decided a while ago on the 'tea time' theme, and as a result, they were able to spend time making that.”

“Whaaat…”

Ōhinata appeared dissatisfied.

“Yeah, I guess if you put it like that I’d have to agree. This is really difficult.”

Looking at her, I couldn’t help but feel like I'd made a mistake. I didn’t really have any obligation to illuminate the truth for Ōhinata, so it probably would have been much easier to just say something like ‘you might be right there’. As an energy-saving advocate, I made the wrong choice.

“In that case, let’s see…”

She began thinking again. Considering Ōhinata wasn't the one who originally thought the pumpkin was strange, she seemed to be very enthusiastic about the whole matter. She said something about always finishing what you start, but maybe that was actually her own motto.

Apparently unable to think of anything else, Ōhinata started to glare menacingly at the Confectionery Society and began saying things like "Anyways, it's pretty much decided that they're bad people."

"That's pretty cruel of you. Even if you say all that, I've found myself eating quite a number of their cookies already."

"Did they come over here to hand some out?"

"They came to sell them to me during the culture festival. So anyways, why do you say they're bad people?"

Ōhinata once again threw a quick glare at the Confectionery Society and then spoke with her chest puffed out.

"This is just something a friend told me, but apparently people who don't use nametags are always pretty shady."

I wonder about that. I think I'd prefer to not have a tag hanging from my chest reading 'Hōtarō Oreki' no matter where I went. Or maybe it was some kind of metaphor.

As I was stuck thinking up a response, Chitanda suddenly raised her head.

"That's it!"

"Wh… what is?"

“Ōhinata-san said it perfectly. How wonderful, that’s exactly the problem.”

The frightened Ōhinata took a step back. Chitanda, try not to scare the innocent first-year.

“What are you talking about?”

Upon hearing this, Chitanda almost certainly started to drill a hole into my head with her strong gaze.

“It’s strange that the pumpkin was placed there.”

“Isn’t that exactly why we started this conversation in the first place?”

“No, not that. I’m talking about this.”

As she said that, she pointed to the only thing place on our table, the signboard that read “Classics Club”.

“I knew I thought something was strange. It’s the fact that the Confectionery Society is missing something.”

From beside the enthusiastic Chitanda, Ōhinata timidly started to ask a question.

“Um… for a while now you two have been constantly mentioning something called the Confectionery Society, but what exactly does that stand for?”[15]

“You see!?”

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[15] While not necessarily clear in the translation, the shorthand that they have been using for Confectionery Research Society, *seika-kenkyūkai*, is *seikaken*, so while it might make more sense in English, the Japanese would sound ambiguous to someone who didn’t know what word was being abbreviated.

As she said that, I finally realized it. The Confectionery Society was missing something that it should obviously have.

Unbelievable. I was so used to Kamiyama High School that I had thoughtlessly glossed over such an important fact. Just by seeing those two jump around, I had known they were from the Confectionery Research Society. However…

"So that's what it was. *They don't have a sign.* 'Confectionery Research Society' isn't written anywhere, not on the table nor on their banner."

"Exactly. Even though they're recruiting new members, they don't have their name anywhere, which should be the most important thing when doing that, and seeing something like a pumpkin there instead made me curious."

Ignoring Ōhinata as she nodded with newfound comprehension concerning the Confectionery Research Society's shorthand, I started to think.

Was it a mistake on their part? No, it couldn't be. For a club that put as much effort into the New Recruit Festival as they did with their extravagant banner, that kind of oversight should have been impossible.

Then, was it just like Ōhinata had mentioned earlier? Had the Confectionery Society done something so shady that it would prevent them from putting their name up? What could something like that even be? In the first place, who would be on the receiving end of that shady action?

Did it have something to do with the gas stove they got permission to use but ended up not using at all?

A large amount of yelling reached my ears. The Quiz Club, the Debate Club, the Photography Club, the Flower Arrangement Club, the Cooking Society, the Astronomy Club, and now, the Confectionery Research Society.

"Oreki-san?"

I turned to face Chitanda.

I felt like I knew what had happened for the most part.

"It's because the place where that pumpkin is sitting right now doesn't belong to the Confectionery Society."

I ended up instantly stating the conclusion without any lead-up.

Naturally there were a lot of steps omitted to get to that point, so Chitanda stared at me blankly.

"What do you mean it's not theirs?"

"Well… It's probably best if I go in order."

I stayed quiet long enough to arrange the explanation in my head.

"Basically, it's this.

"If there was a club that filed for permission to use a tabletop gas stove, that club would be assigned an extra-large table. However, on the day of the event, the club that arrived at that table, the Confectionery Society, didn't need the gas stove at all. Why?

"It's because the club that applied to use the gas stove wasn't the Confectionery Club."

“Which means...” Chitanda covered her mouth with her hands. “They stole the table?”

That carefree duo from the Confectionery Society did? No, that’s not it.

“What I’m saying is *they switched tables,* the Confectionery Society and whoever put in the request for that gas burner.

“This explains why they would look like they put in a request for the gas burner without actually needing it in the first place. Because they didn’t plan on having an extra-large table, they brought a pumpkin to fill up some space. It’s also why they don’t have a sign. They probably didn’t put their sign out in order to fool the General Committee who would have realized they were ignoring the table assignments.”

“B… but…”

Likely unable to believe it right away, Chitanda shook her head.

“If that were the case, that would mean the club originally assigned that table would be at a disadvantage. Why would they do that?”

Without directly answering her, I gestured to point out the large number of clubs tightly lined up next to each other throughout the gardens around us.

“Somewhere in this courtyard is a club that was originally supposed to use a gas stove but isn’t.”

“You know you don’t really have to beat around the bush,” interrupted Ōhinata from the side. “If you’re talking about a club that uses fire, there shouldn’t be too many of them no matter how you look at it.”

O sweet, naïve first-year. You underestimate the sheer number and variety of clubs in Kamiyama High School. I don't know what rock you've been living under, but one small mistake and Classics Club might have been forced to serve a tempura lunch and pork soup, that's the kind of school this was.

Though, saying that, I was certainly wrung dry during the occasion.

Chitanda started to whisper.

"Oh, that's right. How could I have forgotten?"

Chitanda had also watched the orientations in the gym. Her memory was far superior to mine, so it wasn't strange that she had remembered.

"The Cooking Society, wasn't it? Didn't they say they were going to treat everyone to a mountain-herb cuisine demonstration at their table during the New Recruit Festival?"

I nodded.

I wondered if the Cooking Society was handing out their food to the new students. No, they weren't. Even now they were telling the students to come to the clubroom if they wanted to try some food.

"I wonder if the ingredients didn't arrive on time."

"The herbs? If they were so strapped as to warrant giving their extra-large table to the Confectionery Society, they could have just lied and cooked up some fake dish instead."

"A fake dish... Couldn't you at least say they could use the ingredients available to them to make something else?"

“They could use the ingredients available to them to make something else.”

Chitanda glared at me. I only said it because she asked me to…

“It wasn’t that. It was a much bigger slip-up. Something happened that rendered them unable to hand out the food to the new students.”

“Maybe they didn’t get rid of the bitter herb taste. No one would want to eat it if that were the case.”

“That’s the same thing. All they would need to do is start over with the remaining ingredients and they’d be fine. Something much more serious would have had to happen for them to be willing to give up the extra-large table like that. With that table, they’d be able to line up all of their cooking utensils and still have a bunch of space, just like the Confectionery Society is enjoying right now.

“The fact that the Cooking Society switched tables with the Confectionery Society and had to keep it a secret means that they must have made a mistake that they couldn’t report. They had such a bad problem that they couldn’t even have anyone wondering why they had an extra-large table with a gas stove but they weren’t using it to make any food. I’m willing to bet on it; the Cooking Society won’t have their name displayed anywhere.”

Just like Ōhinata had said, those who didn’t have nametags were shady.

At some point, my voice had become soft. Perhaps because it was hard to hear me amidst all the hustle and bustle, Chitanda had brought her face close to mine. Incidentally, Ōhinata had also bent

over and brought her tanned face closer. She was the first to whisper her question.

“Does that kind of mistake even exist? No offense, but what’s the worst that a club could do with their cooking? No matter how much they mess up, what kind of mistake could force them to keep quiet about it?”

If she thought that was really the case, then she really was truly naïve.

“It’s related to food handling. Even a shop would be forced to temporarily shut down if they made this mistake.”

“Wait, do you mean…”

I nodded, and softened my voice even more.

”It’s food poisoning.”

3. Present: 4.1km; 15.9km Remaining

At the end of the day, it turned out that I was mostly correct about the food poisoning, but Chitanda's hypothesis about them not getting their mountain herbs in time had some truth to it as well.

The Cooking Society had failed in their preparation of the herbs. It appeared that they had initially intended on cooking a miso soup made from bracken, but when some of the club members sampled it during lunch, they complained that their stomachs began to hurt.[16]

If they were truly intending on hiding their slip-up, there was a strong possibility that the affected members wouldn't even go to the infirmary for help. As I said this, Chitanda immediately started to run off. I suppose she didn't take food poisoning from mountainous herbs lightly.

"They might need help," she said as she did so, but I wasn't so sure about leaving one's table empty during the New Recruit Festival. The flustered Ōhinata responded with, "Oh, then I'll help too," and then started chasing after her. I heard what had happened after that from Ōhinata later.

"Chitanda-senpai barged into the Cooking Practice Room without a second thought. At first the Cooking Society members tried to play dumb, but once they could tell she knew everything that had happened, they pulled out the members with the ruined stomachs. It looked like she knew some of the people in the club, so things went more quickly than expected."

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[16] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pteridium_aquilinum

“Chitanda has acquaintances everywhere. So, how were the poisoned members faring?”

“Not very well. It looked like they really wanted to go home and rest, but they knew they couldn’t do that. The second she saw them, Chitanda-senpai rushed out of the classroom and brought back some student who looked something like an aspiring doctor. Apparently her family is in the hospital business, and she looked really cool and all, but it felt like she was really annoyed by the whole situation.”

That was most likely Irisu-senpai. Ōhinata had said she looked annoyed, but she was probably no different than how she normally was.

“She had them throw up using salt water and then told the others to bring the students to her place if their condition got any worse. Taking them to the hospital would only make things complicated, after all.”

“I guess if they got food poisoning, the doctors would have to report it to the school infirmary.”

“I wonder if they’d actually have to. Isn’t there doctor-patient confidentiality or something like that?”

“I have no clue.”

“At any rate, the members fortunately recovered after throwing up.”

That was a relief.

The Cooking Society managed to hide their failure. According to Ōhinata, Chitanda sternly lectured the entire Cooking Society on

how to properly handle mountainous herbs as a condition in overlooking their irresponsible actions. At that point, I was convinced that this time for sure no one would be coming to our Classics Club table, so I took out my book and continued to read.

I had only managed finish one paragraph however, when Ōhinata started to speak again, showing her teeth in a bright smile reminiscent of the one she showed me when I first noticed her earlier today.

"I'm going to join this club. What's it called again?"

Chitanda told her at that point.

"Are you sure? We haven't explained what we do at all yet."

"I'm sure."

She looked at me and then Chitanda and then smiled once more.

"It feels really friendly over here. Seeing people having a good time with their friends is my favorite thing in the world."

I don't remember what I said in response.

The upward slope was finally starting to become fierce, and the number of students that were passing me on it while struggling for oxygen was increasing as well. I hadn't initially intended on it, but at some point without realizing it, I had slowed my pace to a walk. I guess I was too wrapped up in my thoughts to pay attention to my speed.

A boy who was in my class last year suddenly passed me. If I remembered correctly, he was in 2-C this year. Class C was catching

up. I hadn't even noticed it until now, so perhaps they were closer than I thought.

As I turned around to look for Ibara, I could see a long line of students running up the sloped street, trailing like a procession of hardworking ants. If I continued to walk slowly like the grasshopper I was, I might end up dying a dog's death by the time the end of the line caught up with me.[17] As I turned my head to face the path ahead of me, the top of the hill came directly into sight. I guess I had ended up mostly walking the entire thing after all. I couldn't say I didn't predict it might turn out like this, but my efforts to measure the distance between Ibara and I had clearly failed.

Intending to compensate for this this slip-up, I sprinted up the small stretch of gentle slope that remained before the peak. My field of vision opened up, and I felt a cool breeze so slight that it could've been simply born from my imagination. I had thought that the slope would instantly enter into a decline the second I reached the top, but I guess I remembered it incorrectly. The street continued on for about 100 meters at a fairly level elevation. There was a miniature shrine located on the side of the road. I didn't know what god was enshrined there, but I figured I might as well form a prayer in my heart just in case. A bunch of unanswered questions were still laid out in front of me after all. My piety usually came around in these kinds of troubling situations.

Both sides of the road opened up, and I could tell by the color of their walls that there were several old houses scattered about. A

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[17] A reference to Aesop's fable, "The Ant and the Grasshopper." The story is about a grasshopper that dies because it is too busy having fun instead of preparing for the winter like the ants in the story were.

single, brand-new vending machine stood among them and I couldn't help but feel that it looked out of place.

I slowly walked along the level street. Because it was the haven right after the grueling hill, there were many others walking as well. A massive guy arrived as if he had sprinted all the way from the bottom of the hill, and he sharply exhaled as he stood still, hunched over while grabbing his knees. I had to wonder if he had decided he was going to use all his strength on this one hill beforehand or if he was planning on keeping this pace up all the way until the end.

I had no proof, but I decided to assume that Ibara was right behind me. If she were to pass me now, doing so on this flat stretch of road would be nice. Trying to talk to someone while they passed you on a downwards slope seemed like it would prove to be somewhat difficult. In order to have that not happen, I began to move at a crawl.

Ibara, huh?

When Ibara first heard that Ōhinata was joining, I wonder how she reacted.

I remember Satoshi's reaction. He had celebrated in a typically exaggerated fashion over the fact that even one new student had joined. "To think that Hōtarō has actually managed to recruit someone… To be frank, I had never even imagined it to be possible. This is truly a miracle." …among other things of that nature. And then to Ōhinata he started asking various questions about Kaburaya Middle School, like if anything had changed or if anyone had transferred.

On the other hand, I didn't have the impression that Ibara felt the same way. Before I realized it, they had become best friends. When

Ibara had first met Chitanda, they had bonded just as quickly. Maybe it was because, even though she looked like a harsh person to other people, she wasn't very shy at all. Even though Ōhinata was clearly taller, it was strange how easy it was to tell who the senior was when the two of them were talking.

When did that happen, I wonder.

"Hina-chan, you look really athletic. I mean you even have the tan."

When Ibara said this, Ōhinata began to look a little embarrassed.

"Some of it's left over from when I went skiing, but I have naturally dark skin as well."

"I see, so you ski, huh? Nearby?"

"Sometimes, but this year I went to Iwate."[18]

"Not snowboarding?"

"No, I only ski. Do you snowboard?"

"I can't do either."

I had remembered that absurd conversation.

In my memory, I could see the two of them smiling brightly.

I looked behind me countless times as I continued to walk forwards.

My prediction was correct. As I was about halfway across the flat stretch, Ibara's face popped up from behind the rising slope.

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[18] Prefecture in the northwest section of Japan's main island.

Her arms were pressed close to her sides, and she was staring at her feet. Because her head was hanging down, I couldn't see her eyes through her bangs. As she was probably taking the run up the slope seriously, I could see that her breathing was rough. She had a thin stride, but as the road leveled out, her arms began to swing more freely. She came running at a set rhythm.

I also raised my arms and abruptly began to run over to her. I matched my pace up with Ibara's and moved alongside her with about a single person-sized amount of space between us.

"Ibara."

When I called out to her, only her eyes moved to look at me.

Surely enough, she remained silent and started to pick up her pace. I had predicted this would happen from the start, so I instantly got to my point without any hesitation.

"I just need to ask one thing, Ibara. Only one thing. It's about Ōhinata."

Even then, Ibara didn't move to face me in the slightest, however I could hear the single word from within her exhale.

"What."

I had decided on what I wanted to ask.

"Yesterday, you said you passed Ōhinata in the hallway. You heard she was going to quit the Classics Club."

Ibara returned a small nod.

“At that moment, Ōhinata said something about Chitanda. Satoshi told me about it; he said Ōhinata mentioned Chitanda was ‘like a Buddha.’ Is this exactly what she said?”

For the first time, Ibara turned her face to look at mine. For a second, I thought it looked like there was a hint of confusion in her pained expression.

She quickly returned to look at her feet as she ran. As if to catch her breath on the flat stretch, she deeply inhaled.

Thinking that me being close would only irritate her, I had purposefully stood somewhat far away from her as the two of us ran, and yet, all of a sudden she closed that distance. In the couple of meters that we ran truly side-by-side, she said a single sentence that forbade interruption.

I slowed down. Ibara continued at her pace and then eventually disappeared as she started to descend the slope.

Her words remained echoing in my ears. Ibara had said this.

“That’s wrong. What Hina-chan said was, ‘Chitanda really does look like a bodhisattva, doesn't she.’”[19]

[19] A bodhisattva is a Buddhist term that refers to someone who has achieved enlightenment through his desire to help others. While similar to a Buddha, a bodhisattva is commonly differentiated by his decision (and sacrifice) to cast aside paradise and return to the earthly realm in order to help others achieve enlightenment as well.

Chapter 2 - Friends Need to be Celebrated

1. Present: 5.2km; 14.8km Remaining

I couldn't move the gears in my head as I descended down the slope.

Even though I had worked so diligently during the climb, all of my hard-earned altitude was erased in a flash as I began to run down the hill. If this was truly my own doing, and I was going to have to descend at some point anyways, why had I even climbed it in the first place? I gravely reflected on these actions of mine.

Though the beginning of the uphill slope had started off gently, the descent had instantly become a steep drop reminiscent of even that of Hiyodorigoe's.[20] Both sides of the road had once again become densely packed with various cedars, so my range-of-vision was blocked. Had I been half-assed in my descent, I would have ended up being at an angle similar to that of someone falling down a cliff, so from that I ruled out the idea. If I were to start running haphazardly, there would have been the strong noise from my feet slamming the asphalt. Running like this would only destroy the knees. Keeping all this in mind, I decided to adopt an energetic

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[20] A famous mountain path located on Tekkai Mountain, one of several mountains in a range to the west of Kōbe City. The path is most commonly known because of the "Droppings of Hiyodorigoe," an event that took place during the Battle of Ichi-no-Tani in 1184 during which an army was surrounded on the mountain path and forced down its steep cliff. For more information: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Ichi-no-Tani (This is specifically an account from the famous Japanese war epic, *Heike Monogatari*, and as a result, there is not much information on this in English, so sorry I couldn't give you a better source.)

running style mixed with a naturally small stride. Even though my feet would normally start to hurt if I ended up running too fast, it was a given that running downhill made going fast easier. If I didn't run seriously at any point throughout the entire 20km course, I would end up not returning until the sun had set.

As a result, I focused solely on running down the slope.

And yet at the same time, Ibara's words—that simple sentence she had heard from Ōhinata—continued to spin around in my consciousness.

Like a bodhisattva… Like a bodhisattva…

For some reason, I couldn't help but feel a slight chill when hearing that supposedly auspicious word, but I descended down the slope too fast to think about the meaning behind it.

The downward slope had one large curve in it. The male students that had smoothly passed me before were running with too much gusto and ended up veering outside the curve. They looked as if they were stomping on furnace bellows.[21] As they realized their situation, I could hear the students up front frantically slamming the asphalt with their feet.

As for myself, I somewhat hugged the inner curve as I turned the corner, and my field of vision finally opened up once more. I could see there was still some snow remaining on the mountains in the distant Kamikakiuchi range. There was no way to say for sure if a winter breeze had been blowing from that direction, but I suddenly began to feel cold regardless.

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[21] A foot-operated blasting tool used in old Japanese furnaces. For more information: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tatara_(furnace)

Satoshi had gone ahead on his bike, and Ibara had also already left. Before Chitanda caught up to me as well, there were some things I wanted to think through first.

As the slope ended and the street became flat once more, I immediately began to relax my legs.

I didn't remember any point at which Ōhinata and I had had a long, proper discussion face-to-face. Probably because Ōhinata had joined the club, however, there actually was a certain something that I had never really given much thought to up until now. Moreover, if there actually was a problem between Chitanda and Ōhinata, this thing might have been extremely crucial in understanding the situation.

I didn't relish the idea of thinking about what had happened that day. How should I put this… It's not like it caused cold sweat to run down my back per se, but I had a feeling that the anxiety I had then still remains to this day.

I could clearly remember both the date and time of week.

It happened on a Sunday.

2. Past: 27 Days Ago

It was a lazy morning.

I had stayed up fairly late the previous night. It wasn't like I was doing anything in particular, but because I had no school the next day, I ended up aimlessly reading and watching TV for a long time.

I had sluggishly woken up late in the morning and saw that there was no one in the living room. I knew that my dad was away for work, but I had no idea what my sister was up to. She might be somewhere in the house, or she might be somewhere outside of Japan. As I unabashedly let out a big yawn, I plopped down onto the sofa.

The remote control was sitting on the low table in front of me. I figured I'd at least turn it on and see what was showing, but I couldn't find anything very interesting, even after changing the channel a couple times. I was still drowsy so the television actually ended up being a little annoying. I had brought the paperback I was reading from my room, so I sank into the couch and opened the pages.

Before reading even a single line, I looked up from the print and muttered to myself.

"It's kind of dark."

The curtains were closed. Naturally I would have preferred them to be open, but because I was so comfortably deep in the couch, getting up would be too troublesome. I put the book aside and

reached for the remote once more. On top of the table was an ashtray and a lucky cat figure.[22]

This lucky cat was a strange little thing. I couldn't tell if it was poorly made or if it was purposely designed like this, but the cat almost looked like it was grinning at you. It was holding a large coin like any other lucky cat would, except instead of the usual assortment of bold phrases that might be written on it, like "great happiness," "fantastic fortune," or "exceeding wealth," it only contained a single word, "lucky."[23] Of course, the only person who would have bought something this half-assed was my sister, but even then, I wondered where she could have possibly bought it.

The inside was hollow, and its arm was spring-loaded so you could move it in an up-and-down beckoning motion. My sister had made some alterations to add onto that feature. She tried making it so that it would shoot an infrared beam. Even though you couldn't see it in the first place, she had still purposely rigged it so that the beam would specifically come from the eyes.

"If a cat's going to shoot lasers, then it has to be from the eyes."

When she told me this, I was speechless, but thinking about it more rationally it's not like it was all that strange. After all, the remote also used infrared beams. She had essentially just put a remote inside the lucky cat.

Its receiver was connected to the fluorescent light on the ceiling. When you moved its arm to invite good fortune, an infrared beam would fly from its eyes and either illuminate or darken the room. As a result, you could take the string off the ceiling lamp and rejoice

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[22] See *maneki-neko* (招き猫): https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maneki-neko

[23] 「招福」, 「大大吉」, 「千万両」, and then 「吉」 respectively.

over the newly spacious surroundings. Except now, as you had to constantly keep the lucky cat there instead of the string, it continued to get in the way regardless. At least have the common decency to use a cat that was actually lovable.

The lucky cat currently sat on the other end of the table, so I reached towards it. That was the reason I even picked up the remote in the first place. In lieu of a stick, I used it to try and move the lucky cat's arm. It looked like I should have been able to reach it, but I couldn't no matter how hard I tried. Had I lifted myself a bit I would have probably been able to reach it, but at that point I might as well be standing. As I tried my hardest to use only my arms while avoiding moving the rest of my body like the plague, a voice called out from behind me.

"Are you finally trying to fully master the art of laziness or something?"

The road to fully mastering energy-preservation was endless; I haven't yet even seen the heights of its perfection. I turned around and saw my sister. It looked like she had taken an afternoon bath because of the bath towel tightly wrapped around the top of her head. She walked into the kitchen and asked, "Want some coffee?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, then pour me some as well while you're at it."

She wasn't going to do it herself? Then why did she even go to the kitchen in the first place?

Because I had gotten so in the mood for coffee, all of the determination and effort that I had previously put into not standing up instantly fizzled away. I slapped my knees to give me the energy

I needed to stand up and then went over to the kitchen to start boiling some water. My sister had her back to me as she stared into the refrigerator and eventually found a sandwich to eat. I had no idea why there was a sandwich in the fridge to begin with. Over the years, I had seen all sorts of things being cooled in that fridge, from bee larvae tsukudani to kangaroo burgers.[24] Compared to those, at least a sandwich wasn't too far removed from normalcy.

"Either dry your hair or eat your food. Don't do both."

I said this bitterly towards her as she still had the towel wrapped around her head, but she ignored me. She took out a single egg and spun it in the sink like a top. The egg quickly lost its balance and toppled over.

"Oh come on, it's raw?"

As she sighed, I figured she must have mistaken the raw egg for a hard-boiled one. It was true that I had made some the evening before, but I ended up eating them myself later that night. I thought it was strange that she even knew I made some in the first place, but who knows. Maybe she saw something like the leftover dishes after I had finished.

Nothing else in fridge must have stood out. She closed the door by pushing it with her lower back and then asked a question from behind me as I was readying some coffee cups.

"Oh yeah, you're cold's gone now, isn't it."

"My cold?"

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[24] Tsukudani is a cooking technique where you boil something in soy sauce to preserve and eat it.

“Wasn’t it pretty bad?”

I thought for a little bit and then responded.

“When was this?”

It was true; I had indeed caught a cold this month.

One day, Chitanda had contacted me, asking me for my help because the spring festival was understaffed. A lot of stuff happened, but long story short, I left to go help them and ended up having a pretty strange day. It was hard for even me to believe that all of that had happened within the span of a single day. I could still vividly recall that pretty scene, surrounded on all sides by the early-blooming cherry blossoms.

It was particularly chilly then, especially after the sun had set. Even though I had been saying it was cold, Chitanda continued to insist that it wasn’t because it was already spring at that point. I’m not saying I caught it because of that, but the very next day, I remained cooped up in my bed. Until my sister had returned later that night, I had been the only one in the house, so all of the chills, fevers, and hunger added up to make me a very miserable sight.

My sister was probably talking about that, but that had happened during spring break. I had all but recovered in around two days, so when I went to the opening ceremony I was completely normal.

“That was a month ago.”

“Really? To think already a month has passed. They grow up so fast.”

As she feigned ignorance, she lightly tapped my head. She started to toss around my hair and then said, “Fix your beadhead.”

I'll do it later.

Someone had so graciously made coffee for her and yet she didn't even so much as taste it. She suddenly said, "Oh, it's time," and returned to her room. I started to read the book I had left on the sofa, but after thirty minutes had passed, she came out of her room again.

"Hey, you aren't going out today either, right?"

I didn't have any plans, but I wasn't too happy with how she said 'either.' I answered without looking away from the book.

"I'm not thinking of doing anything."

"I wonder how much distance you've covered throughout your entire lifetime."

"Siblings need to balance each other out."

After I said this, she replied in a condescending tone.

"So you're saying you've been resting up on my behalf. Aren't you a kind one."

My not leaving the house only compensated for her extravagant use of gasoline, airplane fuel, and other travel costs. As an energy-saving advocate, this was my apology to human civilization for the actions of my idiot sister.

"What a pitiful child."

She had said something so cruel.

"Well at any rate, continue doing nothing until 2:30."

"You want me to watch the house?"

"Yeah. If no one comes, you're free to do whatever."

I didn't have any plans to go out in the first place, but just being told this made me feel uncomfortably restricted. As I continued reading the book, I spoke.

"Get me something."

It looked like she was already putting her shoes on. Her voice rang from the house entrance.

"Then I'll buy you some candles. You like those, right?"

Since when?

Because she had mentioned the candles, however, I knew that she hadn't forgotten what today was. It didn't look like she was intending on celebrating it, though…

Surely enough, when I was a kid, I loved to blow out the candles on cakes.

Today was my birthday.

What could she have possibly meant by telling me to watch the house until 2:30? I put my book aside part-way, and threw myself face down on the sofa to think. It was sister. She was probably planning something unnecessary. She had told me to wait because something was probably coming, but what was it?

Having something celebratory arrive while I was here would be wonderfully considerate of her. Because it would be such a decent thing for her to do, I consequently knew that that wasn't going to be the case. Tomoe Oreki wasn't the kind of person who did things like

that, and even if I was wrong, setting up the delivery time for 2:30 in the afternoon would be far too half-assed for her.

She had told me, “If no one comes, you’re free to do whatever.” That meant that most likely someone would be coming rather than something. Someone who would come on my birthday… Actually, it could be incorrect to assume my birthday played into it at all. It could simply be someone like a bill collector or neighborhood information distributor that was coming. Maybe it was wrong of me to assume that she was setting this all up. Maybe I'd been suspecting her too much.

Even as I said this to myself, however, I couldn’t get rid of the bad premonition lingering in my head. Because I was overly conscious of the time, it was only natural that the second hand seemed to move far too slowly.

I had lost the desire to eat, so I continued to wait without making myself lunch. I finally finished the book I had been reading, but I didn’t have enough time to get into a second one. I switched on the television and turned to a travel program. This was how I passed the time, watching complete strangers enjoying delicious-looking food in a first-class inn.

Thinking back on it, the way she had specifically stated “if they don’t come” meant that it didn’t necessarily mean that they were going to come at 2:30. She wasn’t indicating an arrival time, but rather an arrival period. For example, had I told Satoshi, using the same exact phrasing, “If I don’t come by 2:30, do whatever you want,” I would be saying something along the lines of, “I should actually be arriving earlier, but there’s a possibility that I’ll be late. If I’m not there by 2:30, just assume I won’t be coming.”

That was why, when I heard the doorbell chime at around 5 minutes to 2:00, I assumed that it wasn't related to the guest that my sister was having me wait for. 'I wonder if it's a demon. Perhaps it's a snake.'[25] For some reason, that feeling started to well up inside of me. I put on a pair of slippers and stepped down into the entrance area, taking a peek through the door's peephole.

It wasn't a demon, nor was it a snake. Neither was it a bill collector or a neighborhood information distributor.

"Ah, shit. So that's what it was."

It slipped from my mouth before I realized it.

Four individuals stood outside: Satoshi, Chitanda, Ibara, and Ōhinata.

As if sensing my presence, Satoshi returned my gaze through the peephole. He showed me a revolting smile and then held up his hand. For all of the various problems she had caused me, there was one thing I was thankful to my sister for.

She had told me to fix my bedhead ahead of time.

There was no helping it. It wasn't like I could send them away.

At any rate, I took them to the living room and had them sit around the low table. Chitanda and Ōhinata sat on the sofa while Satoshi and Ibara sat on floor cushions.

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[25] A Japanese proverb. (鬼が出るか蛇が出るか) It refers to the fear of the unknown.

Satoshi wore a polo shirt and cargo pants. Ibara wore a gray parka and shorts. Chitanda had on a knitted peach-colored sweater and a skirt that reached below her knees. Ōhinata wore a graphic tee and jeans. Staring at this unfamiliarly dressed ensemble around me, I started to grumble.

"Gentlemen, what on earth is this goose before me?"[26]

"What the hell are you talking about?"

Even as Ibara sat with such well-mannered form, her speech remained unsurprisingly foul. Neglecting Ōhinata as she responded with, "Oh, that's Sakutarō," Satoshi started to laugh.

"Are you perhaps wondering what foul wind could have possibly blown us your way?"

I nodded wordlessly.

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[26] This is a line from famous Taishō-era poet Sakutarō Hagiwara's mysterious existential poem entitled "Death" 「死」, found in his collection, *Howling at the Moon* 『月に吠える』. Because the poem is short, I'll translate it here so you can interpret it for yourself. (Source for those curious and able to read Japanese: http://www.aozora.gr.jp/cards/000067/files/859_21656.html)

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From the depths of the land I gaze at,
Strange hands protrude,
Legs protrude,
A head intrudes,
Gentlemen,
What on earth,
Is this goose before me?
From the depths of the land I gaze at,
I make a foolish face,
Hands protrude,
Legs protrude,
A head intrudes.
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There was no doubt that they came to celebrate my birthday. After all, Ōhinata was carrying a box tied with a ribbon and featuring the logo of a cake shop that even I knew on the side, so I couldn't exactly ask them why they had come.

The thing was, however, Satoshi and I had known each other for three years now and not once had we celebrated each other's birthday. Even had he decided to do this as some kind of joke, there's no way he'd think to bring the rest of the Classics Club. We just weren't that kind of group.

Sure we had come together once, purely on a collective whim, to write the anthology. But we weren't so close as to randomly hang out at someone's house to kill time. That's what I had thought, and I was pretty sure the other members felt the same way. As if to suddenly close that distance, something perplexing ended up happening.

"I thought that we'd be a bother if we came so suddenly, but…"

Chitanda's words were full of consideration. I wasn't really bothered, but rather…

"I was surprised."

"I figured you'd be."

Satoshi shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm equally as surprised. Talking about it is one thing, but I never imagined this would actually happen in reality."

There were two things I wanted to ask.

"How did you guys know about today, and whose idea was it to come here?"

“Well, it’s a long story…”

Chitanda tilted her head as if trying to decide where to start.

“When Ōhinata asked us if we had ever done something like a party with the entire club, I told her about the culture festival after-party, but then she asked me if we had done anything aside from that, and I told her that I couldn’t think of anything else really, so she…”

It did look like it was shaping up to be a long story. At that moment, however, Ibara cut in and swiftly said, “When I mentioned that your birthday was coming up, Ōhinata said that we should throw you a birthday party.”

“You knew when my birthday was?”

“Only that it was in April. That’s the kind of thing you’d normally remember about someone in your class.”

“I wouldn’t.”

“That’s because you’re an inconsiderate human being.”

Thinking about it, Ibara has had plenty of chances to learn my birthday up until now. We had been in the same class all throughout elementary and middle school, and especially in elementary school, they often had those “Who has a birthday this month?” posters. If she had remembered my birthday was in April, it’d be easy for her to check the old class anthologies to find my actual birthday.

Without the motive, however, she wouldn’t have done it. In other words, the culprit was Ōhinata.

“So you were the one that came up with it, huh?”

I stared holes into Ōhinata. Her eyes were darting around the living room, but when they finally met mine, she smiled without a hint of trepidation.

“Friends need to be celebrated.”

That motto’s correctness aside, there were ways to celebrate that involved being alone and undisturbed.

“And there’s no one that could be in a bad mood after having a party thrown for them.”

There wasn't a trace of self-doubt in her. And having said that, she planned on making me one of those happy individuals. Yay.

Unfortunately for her however, not a single person had said “Happy Birthday” to me yet.

“That aside, I’m surprised everyone is actually here.”

No matter how hard Ōhinata might’ve tried to push the idea of having a party, it was almost unbelievable that everyone would have gone along with it. Chitanda might have simply wanted to make the new recruit happy, but I couldn’t for the life of me imagine a scenario in which Ibara agreed. As if hearing what I was thinking, the girl in question spoke bluntly.

“I'm going to be watching a movie in the evening, so this is just to kill some time before then. Two hours is all I’ll spare for your celebration.”

Are you a mind-reader?

“We bought drinks so go get some cups.”

You should have bought paper cups too then… I saw Satoshi had brought a paper bag full of snacks. Instead of eating them from the bag, it would probably best if I brought out a tray to stick them on. If I remembered correctly, the wooden tray was in the cupboard. Also, if there was a cake in Ōhinata's box, then I should pull out a knife and some plates for later. I wonder if we had enough plates to go around. Of course we'll need spoons as well. Having forks might also not be a bad idea.

As I stood up from my chair and went to the kitchen to search for this and that, a doubt suddenly crossed my mind.

If this was a birthday celebration, then I had the main role.

And yet, why was I the only one up and moving around?

When I brought the utensils and dishes back to the living room, I noticed that the ashtray, the book I had finished reading, and the television remote had all been cleaned up and placed on top of the sideboard. Only the lucky cat had remained, still enshrined in its corner of the table, continuing to expose its unlovable grin.

The snacks that Satoshi had bought turned out to be some fairly fashionable biscuits.[27] Chitanda had mentioned, "They look like they'd be good with jam," so I also prepared a smaller plate in addition to the larger one for the snacks and brought out some summer mandarin jam from the refrigerator. Upon seeing the jar, Ōhinata exclaimed with joy.

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[27] From here on, 'biscuits' will refer to confections like these: http://tosaichi.jp/millet/millet-600-7.jpg

“Oh! That’s ‘MilleFleur’ jam isn’t it!”

Looking at the label, I could see the word “MilleFleur” written on it. Had I not heard the correct way to say it, I probably would have pronounced it something like “Mile Flew.” Making sure I didn’t reveal this thought of mine, I responded, “Yeah,” with my chest puffed out.

“To think you would pull out something like ‘MilleFleur’ so casually, what a classy upperclassman you are, jeez.”

This smiling Ōhinata was a good, honest girl, but there also happened to be a not-so-honest girl in the vicinity. Clearly suspicious, Ibara started to question me.

“Do you even know what that is?”

“Nope, not at all.”

“Then why were you acting like it?!”

“I wanted to look cool. My bad.”

I apologized and asked Ōhinata from the start.

“What is it?”

After learning the truth about my childish vanity, Ōhinata looked at me with unbelievably cold eyes, but she recovered quickly enough and picked up the jar of jam.

“It’s a specialty jam shop. It’s really well-known. I once bought one myself a while back, and, as expected, the taste befits its high price.”

“So it’s expensive, huh?”

I muttered without thinking as I looked at the jar.

“Well, not really. Expensive as jams go, at least.”

I couldn’t imagine this tanned, lightly-dressed Ōhinata doing something like going to a specialty shop to buy jam. I knew it was wrong of me to judge a book by its cover, but still…

“I wonder if it’s a bit of a waste to eat good jam like this with simple biscuits.”

As Satoshi voiced his concerns, however, Chitanda responded with a small smile.

“It should be fine, right?”

And with that, it became fine.

Ōhinata mentioned that she had brought a lighter, so I could only assume it was to be used in lighting birthday candles for the cake. The preparations were ready, but cake would probably happen a little later on.

The drink that Ibara had prepared was carbonated white peach juice that not only resembled champagne, but came in a similar bottle as well.

“Now come on Hōtarō, certainly you have something a little more sophisticated than these.”

Spurred into the kitchen once more by Satoshi’s comment, I pulled out several unused glasses intended for guest-use that hadn’t even been taken out of the box they initially came in. They were short and had no stem. The design etched into it shined as if it were crystal.

“What were these called again?”

Ibara asked this while tilting her head in thought.

“It’s a cup,” I told her, but she wasn’t listening, as per usual.

“It’s not a tumbler glass, nor is it a goblet…”

“Is it a Kiriko glass?”[28]

Ōhinata had proposed this, but it appeared like that wasn’t the case.

“That’s just a decorative variety. No, that’s not it, what was this shape of glass called again?”

“It said whiskey glass on the box.”

A slight show of vexation appeared on Ibara’s face.

I had personally thought that glasses with long stems would be more fitting, but it couldn’t be helped that there weren’t any in the house. There actually might’ve been some laying around, but if that was the case, I didn’t know where they were. To make matters worse, I could only find four whisky glasses, which meant…

“Wait, is Oreki-san the only person with a normal cup?”

…something like that ended up happening. No matter how you looked at it, this was a terrible way to treat today’s main character.

As the juice was passed around, Ōhinata spoke.

“Well then, someone should propose a toast.”

Satoshi and Ibara exchanged glances with each other and then looked over towards Chitanda, almost as if they had planned on doing so ahead of time. Perhaps aware that she would be the one

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[28] A type of Japanese cut glass. See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Satsuma_Kiriko_cut_glass

chosen, Chitanda picked up the glass without looking like she intended on refusing.

Wearing an ambiguous smile that suggested she had no idea how to go about this, Chitanda began her speech.

“Umm, today is Oreki-san’s birthday, so let’s celebrate it. I wish I could’ve given you a present, but because this was on such short notice, I have to apologize for not being able to bring one.”

“Your presence is present enough.”

The one who interjected with this statement wasn’t me. It was Satoshi. Hearing him fabricate people’s feelings for them was troubling.

“Hearing that makes me feel better.”

And hearing her feel better after hearing that fabrication was troubling as well.

“Out of all of us, you were the quickest to turn 17. So, umm… congratulations. Cheers.”

We held up the four whiskey glasses and one cup and lightly tapped them together. Although the birthday was supposedly being thrown for my sake, Ōhinata seemed to be the one who was exceptionally happy.

It was at this point that one of my worries had disappeared.

It wasn’t like I had specifically wanted to be told congratulations or anything, but rather, I was anxious that they might have only planned on eating and drinking, returning home immediately after.

Now that they had completed the toast, my birthday had been properly after all.

There was one other thing that I couldn't say didn't bug me, however.

It was the lucky cat.

Why was it still on the table? While I was getting the plates and silverware, they had cleaned up the table for me. They had put everything that was on it onto the nearby sideboard, and yet, only the lucky cat had remained.

I wonder if it was a coincidence. No, out of everything on the table, that was easily the thing most likely to get in the way. Even though they were planning on spreading the food around the table, they had to do so now while specifically avoiding the lucky cat. Perhaps someone had been poking around at it to figure out why it had been sitting there?

I had already made a mistake. To think I had so thoughtlessly brought out this amazing summer mandarin jam without knowing just how truly impressive it actually was. Fortunately the conversation veered away from that at least.

I'd have to be careful from now on.

Satoshi's biscuits were just the slightest bit salty, and as a result, the jam worked really well with it. I'd always thought that I preferred sweet things, but the tartness of the summer mandarin jam proved

to be quite refreshing; it was—how should I put this—something like comparing the épée to the foil.[29]

"Fukube-senpai, you've come here to hang out before, right?"

As Ōhinata asked this, Satoshi turned to me.

"I don't think so."

"Nope."

"I've been nearby before, but it was just us meeting up at some park in the area. I think I was borrowing something from him."

I twisted my head. Just like he said, I had made Satoshi wait in a nearby park a while back while I went there from my house. However…

"Are you sure? I have a vague recollection that you were actually returning something."

It had only been two years or so and already I couldn't remember it very well. Of course this vague memory wasn't going to prove very trustworthy, but I couldn't sit still while our views were diverging. Agreeing with that, Ōhinata then said, "Perhaps you came two times, once to borrow something and then once to return it."

Of course, what a reasonable idea.

"Except you never once went all the way to his house, right?"

"I don't think going to his house would impact our being able to do what we needed to do."

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[29] Both weapons used in fencing, the épée is heavier and more rigid while the foil is much lighter and easier to use.

Ōhinata muttered a dubious sound and brought the whiskey glass to her lips.

“That’s pretty straightforward of you. If it were me, I’d say something like ‘I’d only be a nuisance,’ but I guess it’s because you’re guys.”

Satoshi tilted his head in response.

“I wonder if that’s the case. I’m the type that keeps light acquaintance and is satisfied by that, so those kinds of general conceptions might not apply to me."[30]

“Which kinds?”

“Every kind.”

I could agree with that.

“I see, I guess people like that exist.”

Ōhinata was deep in thought. Speaking as a guy, I personally didn’t think that Satoshi and I preferred ‘light acquaintance’ to any special degree. It was probably normal. If I had to name it, although Ōhinata was particularly tomboyish, it’s possible that there really weren’t any guys that could talk about these kinds of things easily.

Ōhinata tossed a biscuit into her mouth, and then raised her head to ask another question.

“Can I ask a question? What kind of room do you have?”

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[30] This is a reference to a passage in the *Zhuangzi*: “Virtuous men keep acquaintances light as water, and narrow-minded men keep acquaintances sweet as rice wine.” For information on the *Zhuangzi*, see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zhuangzi_(book)

My room, huh? I started to brace myself.

“It’s pretty normal. There’s a bed, a desk, and a bookshelf.”

“Isn’t it decorated with anything?”

I don’t think I mentioned anything like that, but I’m sure there was at least something sticking on the wall. As I quietly tried to remember if there was, Ibara suddenly started saying some unnecessary things while petting the lucky cat’s head.

“You should just stop there, Hina-chan. Even this guy is entitled to his privacy.”

She then turned towards me and flashed a cold smile.

“Besides, it’s a guy’s room, so I’m sure you can already imagine what kinds of things are laying around.”

I wasn’t exactly sure what Ibara was imagining, but there was nothing in it that could justify the grin full of contempt directed at me. …Well, there wasn’t much at least.

“I can’t really imagine anything.”

As Ōhinata muttered this, Satoshi responded with a smile.

“Things like textbooks.”

I also contributed.

“Reference books as well.”

“Also dictionaries, right?”

“Of course.”

Ibara had an amazed look on her face.

“Are you guys dumb or what?”

The number of biscuits on the snack dish in front of us became progressively fewer. I hadn’t actually thought that they would all be eaten, but if they were, the cake would naturally come next. As I reached for another one, it suddenly dawned on me that I hadn’t eaten anything for lunch. I then had a thought.

“By the way, did you guys have lunch?”

The responses were varied.

Chitanda responded, “A light one.”

Ōhinata responded, “I did.”

Ibara responded, “I had a late breakfast, so not yet.”

Satoshi responded, “I haven’t.”

As I was at the same time today’s main character and host, it was probably my job to suggest something.

“If that’s the case, we can get some pizza.”

“Eh?! But I’d feel terrible if you treated us.”

Chitanda was trying to be thoughtful, but there was no way in hell I was going to treat them.

“We’d obviously split the tab.”

“O… oh, that makes sense.”

At that moment, Satoshi also interjected.

“I agree, at first I was also thinking it might be nice to get pizza. After all, it’d be a perfect idea if there were a lot of people going to be eating. But I forgot about something.”

“Was the pizza place closed?”

“If the pizza place was closed on Saturday would they ever get any business? No, it was, well…”

He glanced at Ibara. Compared to the hesitating Satoshi, Ibara spoke as bluntly as she always had.

“I can’t do cheese. Sorry.”

“…Oh, I see. I didn’t know.”

“I’d be more surprised if you did know my preferences.”

There was occasionally cheese in the school lunches, so It wouldn’t be too strange if I did know, and yet, even then, I didn’t. She told me this earlier, but I guess I was pretty inconsiderate.

“You're also bad with cheese?”

As Ōhinata thrusted a magnificent amount of jam onto the biscuit and then tossed it into her mouth in a similarly magnificent fashion, she suddenly jerked her body forward in curiosity.

“Yeah, a little bit. It’s not like I’m allergic to it, but I just can’t seem to eat it.”

“Is it the taste?”

“It’s probably how it smells. If it’s something like chilled, thin-sliced cheese, it doesn’t really smell, so that’s fine, but I can’t bring myself to even get near it if it’s cooked. You also don’t like it, Hina-chan?”

Upon hearing this, Ōhinata flashed a huge smile.

“This is just something a friend told me, but people should really throw away rotten mandarin oranges and milk.”

I wonder if Ōhinata had a habit of dragging her friends into the mix when she couldn't think of a good way to word something. As expected, Ibara returned a forced smile.

"It's be nice to have that kind of resolution, but it still kind of bugs me that that it's become something like a weak point of mine. I'll have to get used to it by the time I become an adult."

If Ibara were to become a hermit in the Pyrenees Mountains and force herself to eat cheese three times every day, I'm sure she would overcome it somehow.[31] She might even have a cheese-related epiphany on the way down. The legends surrounding Ibara Dairy Manufacturers and how they took the world of cheese production by storm would begin then and there. Maybe.

If she simply didn't like the taste, then it would be fine as long as she didn't eat it, but as the problem was her not liking the smell, even ordering the pizza would be problematic. Judging by all the pizza shop fliers that were constantly shoved in our mailbox, it's possible that there were pizzas that didn't use cheese, but I didn't necessarily want pizza so bad that I would beg for that possibility. Besides, the biscuits were surprisingly filling.

"Anyways, Oreki-senpai, you really don't know anything at all about Ibara-senpai, do you. Even though you were in elementary school together?"

"Pretty much."

"Why're you bragging about it?" cut in Ibara.

That's not what I had intended.

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[31] A range of mountains on the border between France and Spain.

Ōhinata, who had been speedily reaching for the snack plate, suddenly stopped. She started to eye up Ibara with a dubious expession.

“Could that mean what I think it means? Have you never been to this house before either, Ibara-senpai?”

“No way in hell. Just because we were in the same school district doesn’t mean that our houses were close.”

“Really? Wait, but…”

Ōhinata looked at Chitanda sitting next to her on the sofa, and then at Satoshi and Ibara. She tilted her head somewhat in confusion.

“We all arrived here without getting even a little lost. I thought one of us had been here before.”

It felt like time had briefly stopped.

So it had come to this.

It had moved from a conversation about my room, and hadn’t even come close to being a discussion about the meaning behind the lucky cat. To think it would end up going in that direction after I had brought up something like getting pizza, it was completely unexpected.

Because I didn’t know something like Ibara’s food preferences, that meant there wasn’t a very strong bond between the two of us, so consequently, she mostly likely had never been to my house before, huh? I see; it did follow logically. This meant, however, that I had already dug my own grave.

Was it still possible for me to change the subject?

No, it was probably too late for that. The conversation had already reached the point of no return. If I desperately tried to interrupt the flow of the conversation, they would only wonder why I was trying to change the topic and become more unnecessarily curious as a result. Ōhinata's question was dangerously close to revealing *the secret that the lucky cat was hinting at.* However, things were still only 'close.' It wasn't a direct hit yet.

It was painful, but the only thing I could do was retreat from the conversation while praying for them to quickly start talking about something else on their own.

If only she understood this as well.

Ibara looked at Satoshi.

"That's, well, you know. Fuku-chan showed us through the streets, right?"

Satoshi showed a look of confusion, and responded, "I was only remembering the map. This neighborhood is a bit confusing, but I'm pretty skilled when it comes to memorizing things. As for where I got the map, though…"

"I prepared it," interjected Chitanda.

"That's right. I got it from Chitanda."

He pulled out the map from his pocket to show everyone. It wasn't one of those extremely fancy maps that showed a lot of details about all the residents, but rather a simple one of the district used by the city. My house's location was marked on it with a red pen.

“Oh, that’s right. That’s because Chi-chan’s been here once before.”

Upon hearing that, Chitanda stiffened her body.

“Remember? That thing last year. When Irisu-senpai came to us over summer break to ask us for our opinions on her video, Chitanda came here to come get him, didn’t she?”

“Ah, no, that was…”

She had a good memory. Certainly enough, Chitanda had come to get me after hearing from Satoshi that I was planning on skipping it, however that time…

“I had gotten close thanks to Fukube-san’s directions, but I never actually ended up finding the house.”

I had received a phone call that day: “I came to get you, but I seem to have become lost, so please come and get me.” I had quickly managed to find her, but it’s like not like she even saw the front of the house that day.

“I knew the address, however, so as long as I had a map, I’d be able to find it.”

“So that’s all it was.”

Ōhinata started to smile brightly again as if she were satisfied by that explanation.

“You'd be able to figure it out if you knew the address, wouldn’t you. For example, let’s see… like something like that.”

As she said that, her face began to darken.

“Something? What would something be, exactly?”

It seemed this first-year was hung up on something strange. There wasn't a single similarity between the two, but somehow, seeing Ōhinata and Chitanda lined up like that on the couch reminded me of a patch of roots.

"Oh! New Year's cards!"

As Ōhinata said this, her face instantly lighting up, Satoshi responded with an unnecessary comment.

"Even so, Hōtarō doesn't do tiring things like that."

That was incorrect. I had actually tried to send some in the past, but I ran into the same problem. I didn't know any of their addresses.

"Is that so?"

Temporarily forgetting her attempts at politeness, she looked at me with a distrusting expression.

"It's obvious people should send New Year's cards to their friends at least."

"It's fine. We all saw each other in person at the end of the year anyways. New Year's cards are just a substitute for the people you aren't going to be able to see."

"That might be the case, but wasn't the only reason we were able to greet Oreki-san because I had called him on the phone myself?" said Chitanda without realizing it.

Satoshi put the biscuit he was gnawing at back down and started to smile.

"Ah, this New Year's was really interesting, wasn't it? After all, Mayaka even…" Satoshi stopped as he felt Ibara's piercing glare.

Even though it probably wasn't like she had been forced to do it, Ibara's part-time job as a miko at the shrine had embarrassed her to no end.[32] Of course, Ōhinata had no idea what they were talking about.

"What about Ibara-senpai?"

"Never mind that. We were talking about Oreki's address, right?"

She forcefully returned the conversation to its previous track. I might've been able to bury the subject for good had I continued to talk about what had happened over New Year's, but if I did do that, Ibara would certainly despise me. That didn't sound like a very appealing outcome either.

As I stressed over this, Ibara suddenly had a blank look on her face that seemed to wonder why she hadn't realized something so simple up to this point.

"What about the graduate anthology? If I remember correctly, it's written there."

"Oh, I see. That makes a lot of sense," nodded Ōhinata, and then she titled her head once more.

"But Chitanda-senpai didn't go to Kaburaya Middle School."

"No, what she said was correct."

Chitanda had finally said it.

"Oreki-san had a friend from middle school named Sōda-san. I've been to Sōda-san's house plenty of times now, so I asked him if I could see the graduate anthology."

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[32] Shrine maiden.

With this, Ibara and Satoshi raised their voices at the same time.

“So that’s what it was. You should’ve told us.”

“Is that so? You should’ve told us.”

As she was scolded by these two, Chitanda uncharacteristically shrunk back, looking ashamed.

“I thought about asking you two, but I kept passing you by, and I had forgotten all about it in the clubroom… And then all of a sudden, I had business to take care of at Sōda-san’s house.”

“Now that I think about it, Sōda was in our class, wasn't he? Although, he doesn’t really strike me as the type of guy that would be connected with Oreki.”

Certainly, it wasn’t anything exactly like that. Even though he was the type to space out a lot, he was really good at soccer. There was a long history of lending and borrowing books between the two of us.

“Aren’t his parents kind of famous?”

“They’re on the city council. They don’t act self-important at all, though.”

Puffing out his cheeks for show, Satoshi shook his head in an exaggerated manner.

“That’s Chitanda-san for you. I knew you were incredible, but to think you’d even know one of Hōtarō’s middle school friends. You truly inspire awe.”

“No, it really was just a coincidence.”

“Perhaps you have already heard the rumors surrounding my dark and mysterious past as well.”

As if to get back at Satoshi for ignoring her, Chitanda gracefully placed the palms of her hands on top of her thighs and showed a smile.

“I see. For example, something like a rumor concerning how you began to sing a song after forgetting to turn the mic switch off in the broadcasting room? Nope, I haven’t heard anything like that.”

After a couple seconds, Ibara let out a laugh.

“Hahaha, that’s right! Something like that happened.”

That had happened in the fall of our third year in middle school. It was both an amusing and a sorrowful tale.

“Chi-chan, I’m surprised you know so much about that kind of stuff. I didn't even remember that until you mentioned it.”

Satoshi, who had repeatedly prodded at the grove to be greeted by a snake, sat without saying a single word, his face still frozen in its previously teasing smile.[33] Satoshi was able to tolerate the vast majority of the jokes aimed at him, but as expected, it seemed that incident remained his sole Achilles heel.

I apologized to Satoshi on the inside. After all, the one who told Chitanda about this particular episode was me.

That said, even I didn’t have the callous heart necessary to finish him off by telling Chitanda that what he in fact sang at that moment was some terrible attempt at hip-hop.

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[33] A Japanese proverb. (藪をつついて蛇を出す) It means to have something bad happen to you while doing unnecessary things.

However, as Chitanda humbly continued to deny Ibara's praise, I found it strange that Ōhinata, on the other hand, sat there with her eyes wide-open in shock, her mouth gaping.

As the time for cake quickly approached, I started cleaning up the snack tray and smaller plates for the jam. After I completed my round-trip between the living room and kitchen, only the lucky cat remained on the table. It was only natural that some jam would be spilled no matter how carefully everyone ate, so I brought a kitchen cloth. As I was wiping, I casually muttered, "This is in the way, isn't it," and proceeded to move the lucky cat to the side board.

I felt like sighing in relief. As long as I could remove that from the table, I could rest easy. The danger had finally passed by.

I brought out a plate for the cake as well as a knife and forks. The grape juice probably wouldn't go with the cake very well. I was told that something like coffee or café au lait would work nicely, so I went to the kitchen once more and waited there for the water to boil.[34]

One cannot see the kinds of faces they naturally make, so as a result, I had no way of knowing whether or not I had a good poker-face. I didn't think that mine was very easy to read. When Satoshi and Ibara, and especially Ōhinata, had been talking about my address, I wondered if they had noticed me feeling like I was walking on dangerously thin ice.

I had already prepared the coffee cups. Instant coffee wasn't exactly the most suitable way with which to treat a respected guest of

[34] French coffee with milk.

honor, but as it was their fault for coming so suddenly, I couldn't be bothered. I continued to watch the silent kettle, waiting for it to whistle. In my experience, the human gaze undeniably inhibited the heating of water. As long as I continued to watch the kettle, the water inside would never boil. If I were to avert my eyes for even a second, that would be the instant, without fail, at which the the kettle would start to whistle. Of course, from an energy-conserving standpoint, it would be best to simply look away then, but there wasn't anything else to look at.

"Oreki-san, the wipe cloth."

As I turned around, I saw Chitanda holding the kitchen cloth.

"Oh, can you put it over there on the edge of the sink for me?"

I returned to watch the kettle. I assumed Chitanda was still there, so I started talking.

"You stayed silent about it, huh."

Following a short silence, I heard a response that seemed like it would be drowned out by the noise coming from the ventilation fan.

"Yes. …I suppose the chance slipped me by."

Previously, Chitanda said that she had learned my address by checking the graduate anthology from my middle school. That she had been told it by a friend of mine, Sōda. It was certainly true that I had had a classmate named Sōda. I had no idea what high school he had gone to after that, but it was definitely not Kamiyama High School. It was most likely true that Chitanda had gotten Sōda to show her the anthology. After all, what she said sounded pretty accurate, and Chitanda wasn't very good at ad-lib, period.

However, it wasn't the entire truth.

Satoshi had never been to my house before. Of course, Ibara was the same.

That last summer break, Chitanda had managed to get near my house but didn't make it all the way was also not a lie.

However, no one said anything about her coming only once. Chitanda had previously come to this house before. Chitanda had handed a map to Satoshi, but even had she not done that, she would have been easily able to find her way through these streets herself.

I heard a slightly dissatisfied voice.

"But you ended up not saying anything either."

"I suppose the chance slipped me by."

It was something that had happened this month.

The festival that Chitanda had participated in was running low on participants, and because the clothing would fit me, I had been roped in to help out. The festival had ended without an hitch, but it was cold that day. I ended up catching a cold.

Of course Chitanda, being the one that enlisted my help, couldn't sit still after hearing I was bedridden. When she had called my house in the morning and heard about my situation from my sister, she immediately came over to visit. Her get-well gift was summer mandarin jam. She told me that mixing a little bit with black tea was good for you when you had a cold. I didn't really drink black tea, however, so afterwards I got a small bowl and simply licked it like that.

It felt awkward to have Chitanda come into my room, so I put up with the cold and met with her in the living room. When you're in a lot of pain, it really isn't easy to receive a guest. Chitanda understood this of course and returned home several minutes after handing me the get-well jam. It was only for a little while, sure, but she had come regardless.

"This is difficult… I feel bad for Mayaka-san and the others, but they won't know if we don't say anything."

I didn't respond as I continued to watch the kettle.

That wasn't how it worked at all, so I became nervous.

She said that they wouldn't know as long as we didn't tell them, but in reality, *Chitanda was simply going to be using her actions rather than her words to declare that she had come to this living room before.*

The party was beginning to near its climax. It would soon be time for the cake to make its grand entrance. At that moment, some candles would be stuck into it and be thusly lit. Ōhinata had brought the lighter.

Chitanda had probably thought of the arrangements at this point. It'd be more atmospheric if all the lights were to be turned off while the candles were lit. That was her plan, right?

That's why the lucky cat remained on the table.

Even though the ashtray, the paperback, and the television remote had all been moved to the side board, *only the lucky cat remained. That was something that only someone who knew about its ability to turn off the overhead light would do.* In other words, *it would point out the single person among all four of them who had come to this house once before.*

In reality, when Chitanda had come to this living room before, it was dark inside so I had pressed the lucky cat's arm to turn on the light. Chitanda would not have forgotten that.

What would actually happen if Chitanda were to use the lucky cat's arm to turn off the lights? Ibara, or perhaps Ōhinata, would probably say something like this:

"Oh my, so the lucky cat functions as a remote, does it? No wonder it was left on the table. But wait a sec, how did you know this was a remote? Now then, Eru Chitanda, not only did you come to this house, to this very living room, but you additionally saw the lucky cat being used as a light switch, didn't you?!"

Had Chitanda remained silent about it when coming with the rest of them to my house, surely she should have moved the lucky cat to the side board as well.

At the moment, however, I couldn't say any of that. The candles were going to be coming up soon, which meant so was the lucky cat. If I pointed out her mistake and she started to act suspiciously as a result of that, things could get difficult. …As I was thinking this, I realized that my keeping quiet about the get-well visit wasn't because "the chance slipped me by." It wasn't like what we did was really all that shady, after all… It was all so absurd.

As I thought this, I couldn't help but let out a small smile. As if noticing this, Chitanda asked me.

"What is it?"

"Well…"

As I considered telling her that it was nothing at all, I mentioned something that had suddenly entered my mind.

“It’s possible that Ōhinata didn’t buy your earlier story.”

“Wha…”

I turned around and tried showing her the meanest smile I could muster, but I couldn’t see my face so I didn’t know how well it turned out.

“Doesn’t saying ‘I asked Sōda’ sound like you might've *sewed a* lie?”

Chitanda tried to force a smile despite her troubled face.

The kettle’s whistle began to scream its high-pitched scream.

3. Present: 6.9km; 13.1km Remaining

The road continued on earnestly in a straight line with hardly a slope in sight. I saw a small mountain off in the far distance, however because I knew the course, I also knew that I'd have to eventually climb it. Because one could see the entire distance while traversing the long, flat road, one became thoroughly fed up with it.

I didn't think about anything while I had descended the slope. I had intended on returning to my thoughts after I completed the hilly segment and started walking again, however an unexpected problem occurred. I could see the entirety of the straight path far too clearly. Even though Kamiyama High students were running in front of and behind me, it was plainly obvious that I was the only one walking nonchalantly. It ended up being somewhat embarrassing, so I started faking a run at a speed that still allowed me to think calmly.

However, I had also realized something else because the road was so open and easy to see. Visible up ahead was a familiar mountain bike. I wondered if there had been some trouble after all. General Committee vice-president Satoshi Fukube was stopped there quite a ways ahead of me.

I brought my arms in. I called out to him as he stood in the distance and then increased my stride.

Satoshi looked like his business had already been taken care of as he stood on the edge of the road, as he seemed to be happily chatting with another student on the General Committee. There were still tens of meters between the two of us when I noticed he started to climb back on his bike. Just as I thought that I wouldn't make it, however, he ended up turning back to look at me. It seemed like he

didn't have any urgent business to take care of considering he stood there waiting for me.

"Hey, Hōtarō. You told me ahead of time so I guess I shouldn't be surprised, but man are you slow."

I stopped walking right beside him, and then took two or three deep breaths. As the two of us started walking side-by-side, Satoshi split up with the other General Committee member and I started to talk.

"I thought you'd be further up by now."

Satoshi shrugged his shoulders as he pushed his mountain bike along.

"If I were seriously pedaling, I'd be at the finish line by now."

"You're that fast, huh?"

"No, my bad. I was just showing off. I'd probably be somewhere in Jinde."

I felt like even that was still him exaggerating, but I let it slide without saying anything further. Satoshi casted a quick glance behind him, and then let out a small sigh.

"It's not like I thought today would end without anything happening, but still…"

"Was there an accident?"

"In the broadest sense of the word. Someone hurt their leg and couldn't move as a result. I called a teacher over and they picked the student up."

He then brought his head close and continued in a whisper.

“I couldn’t tell just by looking, but I’m not so sure he actually hurt his leg.”

That was to be somewhat expected.

“Oh really? Were you hoping that the entire student base would run the whole course honestly and without deceit?”

As I said this in a mocking tone, Satoshi uncharacteristically raised his eyebrows.

“There’s no way I’d think something like that.”

“You didn’t have to respond so adamantly.”

“If there was a student able to evade the General Committee’s watchful eyes and find a shortcut, I’d actually give them my applause, but those guys... even though they aren't doing anything skillful, they still end up smiling like they're all that. If they do something like that, the teachers have to come in a car and pick them up. Some of them might really be hurt, but for those who are just putting on an act, I couldn't praise something so lacking in class. I wish they’d choose a more tasteful method.”

There were a thousand Kamiyama High School students. The trouble probably wouldn’t end with that one incident. One could only wait with baited breath for the next one.

Satoshi glanced at his watch.

“Honestly speaking, I’m pretty far behind schedule right now. I want to get moving soon, so is there anything you wanted to ask me, Hōtarō?”

I had been busy preparing questions under the assumption that I was going to be seeing Chitanda first, however, meeting Satoshi

before then turned out to be very lucky indeed. Satoshi's knowledge covered a wide breadth of genres far exceeding my own, and even had that not been the case, I was still thankful to have a different perspective than my own on these matters.

There were two things I wanted to say, or rather, ask.

"Let's see. I want you to listen to a purely hypothetical story."

"There's even a preface, huh? Fine by me. Go on."

I gathered my thoughts as I continued to walk. That sounds good, something like that.

"Let's say I were to say something like, 'This is just something a friend told me, but no matter how you think about it, it's pretty unfair that the General Committee doesn't have to run," what would you think?"

Satoshi stared at me long and hard, and finally responded in an unusually serious tone.

"So that's what you really think, huh? I'd think something like that would make me pretty upset."

"Just do your damn job. I couldn't think of any other hypotheticals."

"Naturally, that's exactly what I was doing, telling you what I thought. Purely hypothetically, of course."

Because I remained silent, Satoshi assumed that I had no more questions and climbed on top of his mountain bike. He matched his pedaling with my walking speed and then started talking again.

“I’m saying this just to make sure you know, Hōtarō, but I really do like girls like Ōhinata. Of course, not in that way if Mayaka ends up hearing I said that.”

“I know.”

As if I had said these words entirely to his satisfaction, he started to gain speed.

I called out from behind him.

“Satoshi”

“Yeah?”

Satoshi pressed the breaks and turned around.

“Is there anything else?”

“No…”

I hesitated to say anything.

There was one thing I wanted to confirm with Satoshi, but I couldn’t bring myself to do it.

In saying that however, it wasn’t like I could keep on stopping Satoshi while he was busy like this. I let out an uneasy breath and then asked.

“This is a question regarding the Japanese language. If someone were to resemble a bodhisattva on the outside, what would they be like on the inside?”

As he heard that, he mumbled something under his breath. I wouldn’t hear it very well, but it was probably something like, “Mayaka didn’t tell me anything like that, though.” He wasn’t

necessarily criticizing Ibara. Most likely, she simply didn't see any reason to tell him what Ōhinata had said perfectly word-for-word.

Just like I had thought, Satoshi knew the word. He knew it much more precisely than someone with a vague recollection of it like me.

"There's a certain saying that suggests if someone resembles a bodhisattva on the outside, then who they are on the inside is set. They would have a heart like a yakṣa's."[35]

And then to lighten the mood with a joke, he added this.

"As far as I'm aware however, Chitanda doesn't have a thing for pomegranates."[36]

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[35] Spirits found in Hinduism and Buddhism. While there are a large variety of differing kinds, the usage here refers to something like an evil devil.

[36] A reference to the myth of Hariti, a tale in which a woman kidnaps other women's children to order to feed her hundreds of kids. After being approached and tricked by the Buddha, she vows to only eat pomegranates instead of children flesh. Full story here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hariti

Chapter 3 - A Very Wonderful Shop

1. Present: 8.0km; 12.0km Remaining

That which you think is right and that which you think is wrong are both things you learn throughout your life from your education and experiences. You are praised for your good deeds and scolded for your bad ones. It's through this that you start drawing the distinctions between right and wrong. On the other hand, what you end up liking and not liking isn't simply something that someone teaches you. If you were to go as far as call it innate, you would be implying that something like a baby disliking cheese in the future would have been decided from the very start, something like a small treatise on destiny. Rather, might something like someone's preferences be akin to the various impulses that boil up from inside one's self as they grow older? In the end, it's inexorably linked with the ultimate question of what one treasures the most.

On that rainy day, Satoshi had told me this on the way home. He then started to smile in a seemingly condescending manner as he continued.

"Inside of you Hōtarō—you who has a wholly insufficient number of things you either like or dislike—is an impulse that you refuse to talk about. That's what Makaya would say. I wouldn't go that far, though."

"If it were Ibara, she would probably say something like, 'That's what Fuku-chan would say. I wouldn't go that far, though.'"

"Nope, Mayaka doesn't talk like that at all. She says everything bluntly. Her choice of words would be much meaner."

That was exactly the case. I was wrong.

When Satoshi and I would go home together, we would usually end up having ridiculous conversations like this while we walked. Sometimes, we would talk about even more ridiculous things like "the ultimate fate of the world," and in even rarer moments, we might even bring up something mildly practical for a change, like "is B5 or A4 sized paper easier to use for notes." What made that day unusual, however, was the audience listening in on our conversation, namely Ōhinata.

The rain was neither violent nor light as it continued to drip down endlessly. We had walked inside a shopping arcade, so our umbrellas were closed. Holding hers with both hands joined behind her back, Ōhinata peered into my face with a lovely gesture that didn't suit her tomboyish appearance and smiled.

"Is Ibara-senpai really that sharp-tongued?"

It wasn't like we had waited for her specifically, but rather, when Satoshi and I had left from the school's front gate, we just happened to see her leaving as well. She had on a bitter smile, saying, "I haven't really made any friends yet," so the three of us ended up walking together. As one might expect from the fact that we all went to the same middle school, our routes home were basically the same.

To Ōhinata's question I replied, "She is." However Satoshi tilted his head in thought.

"It's not like she'll lash out at anyone. As a matter of fact, I haven't seen her act harshly towards Chitanda-san even once."

Thinking about it, that much was certainly true, but I felt like the comparison was a little unfair.

Ōhinata then spoke in a soft voice that sounded as if she had just figured out some terrible secret.

“Maybe that has something to do with the fact that Chitanda-senpai knows a whole lot of people.”

“Um, so are you basically saying that Chitanda-san knows all of Mayaka’s weaknesses and is able to keep her on a leash as a result?”

Satoshi couldn’t help but smile in disbelief. It was such a ridiculous idea that I lost all willpower to even respond. Ōhinata was quick to change the subject, as usual. She quickly smiled and said, “Well, I suppose now I understand that Oreki-senpai is someone that doesn’t treasure anything.”

“Now hold on...”

“What about you, Fukube-senpai? What do you treasure?"

I had voiced an exceedingly dissatisfied statement, but my plea for reassessment went unheard. Satoshi shrugged and readily responded.

“That which makes me unique, I guess.”

Ōhinata let out a disappointed "Is that so," and this time Satoshi posed the question.

“Well, because you keep asking others, what about you?”

“Me?”

She had an impish look about her as she started to speak more loosely.

“Well as a girl, I’d have to say to say I treasure love above all else.”

As this underclassman went on about love in front of me, I started feeling like I had just witnessed a koala in the flesh, in that it was an extremely well-known animal, one that I could easily identify by its appearance, but I had never actually seen one in real life.

“Is that so…”

Satoshi responded in the exact same way that Ōhinata had done so to his previous answer. Almost as if motivated entirely by obligation, he then asked, "Oh, so there's someone like that in your life?"

As she heard this, Ōhinata suddenly broke out into a huge grin.

"Nope, not at the moment. I guess because that's the case, what's really important to me would be…"

She suddenly dropped her gaze to stare at her feet and continued, only her voice still containing the enthusiasm she just had.

“…friends.”

I clearly understood why Satoshi had previously let out his disappointed “Is that so…” Although it wasn’t a very pleasant subject, I was still expecting her to respond with a more elaborate answer. “Love” wasn’t exactly a terrible one, but it was so clichéd.

On the other hand, I could also understand why Ōhinata had responded similarly as well. Although she had just entered high school, had a student heard something like, “That which I treasure most is my own unique nature,” they would most likely not be very moved.

I understood the vague meaning behind his words, however. Even though his face constantly looked as if he had never faced a single hardship in the world, he had many problems in his own way, and he tried to correct these to produce a better version of himself. There were many times when I could only think about how incredibly carefree I was compared to him. Even though his statement might have made an entirely ordinary impression, there was a determination in that answer that really defined who Satoshi was.

I started thinking from there.

First came love, but because there were no prospects there, her answer became her friends. This was what Ōhinata had said. That kind of answer was certainly uninteresting by itself, however, just as Satoshi had a unique determination that only he could have, the same had to be the case for Ōhinata. Had she simply said those words out of longing? Probably not.

After all, when Ōhinata had offered up "love" as her answer, she had been smiling, and yet, when she switched her answer to "friends," her eyes were cast down.

I knew the answer rested in that behavior, but I couldn't figure out the exact meaning behind it.

The reason I felt like I could understand at least a small portion of Satoshi's inner workings was because of a certain incident. Last winter, after a series of complicated happenings, Satoshi opened up to a minuscule degree that which rested behind his façade and shared it with me.

Compared to that, I hadn't experienced anything similar with this underclassman girl, Ōhinata. After all, it hadn't even been two

months since I had met her. Could I even hope to understand her given the circumstances?

It might've been possible. The fact remained, however, that I hadn't even tried.

While I ran, I tried to think of a way to reclaim that which I had lost by not looking at those in front of me head-on. It was idiotic of me. For example, if I didn't listen to a lecture during class, I would have to buy a reference book before the test came around. It was like making the rope only after seeing the thief.[37] At any rate, it was difficult for the energy-saver in me to say it, but I had only one option open to me. If a person resembled a bodhisattva on the outside, then they were like a yakṣa on the inside. A yakṣa. In other words, a demon.

There were three ways to interpret this.

The first way was to assume that Ibara's memory was incorrect and that Ōhinata had actually said something entirely different. In the end, though, that was more along the lines of wishful thinking. Exactly what kind of misunderstanding would have had to take place for her to incorrectly hear the sentence, "She really does look like a bodhisattva, doesn't she."

The second way was to assume that Ōhinata had indeed said that exact line, but had meant it purely as a simple feeling or observation, without any hint of an ulterior meaning. This was also difficult to justify. Up until this point, I had never heard anyone use the phrase "That person is like a bodhisattva" to compliment someone else. Of course, you couldn't say that there wasn't anyone

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[37] A Japanese proverb. (盗人を見て縄を綯う) It refers to someone desperately starting preparations after it is already too late.

in this world that used strange phrases like that to praise others. Still overall, I had exchanged words with Ōhinata numerous times by this point, so I thought that it was safe for me to say that she didn't fit that description.

This meant that I had to concede to the third possibility after all: Ōhinata had referred to Chitanda in a roundabout manner as being like a demon. It was a peculiar use of the language, but I could understand why she would do it. She wanted to criticize Chitanda, but naturally she couldn't say anything like that out loud in front of Ibara, who was such good friends with her. She probably didn't expect Ibara to catch onto that meaning alone.

If it did become a problem, Ōhinata could simply pretend that she didn't know anything about lesser-known idioms, like "A person who resembles a bodhisattva on the outside is a yakṣa on the inside." However, not only had Satoshi known the meaning behind the word, but I also clearly remembered some incriminating points as well. On the day of the New Recruit Festival, she had mentioned, "classical Chinese literature seems difficult, but I love Japanese studies," and she was also able to quickly discern that the joke I told on my birthday was a line from one of Sakutarō Hagiwara's poems. As I saw it, Ōhinata was quite skilled in this discipline.

And yet, in the end, I still wasn't satisfied.

I couldn't think of anything that might have gone poorly between Chitanda and Ōhinata.

I didn't doubt that whatever had happened yesterday after school ended up being the deciding moment. I simply thought it was impossible for there to be absolutely nothing leading up to that

moment. I suppose there was something I thought was strange. It happened on a Saturday if I remember correctly.

I ended up running a bit too much. I didn't raise my head. So far, I hadn't been sweating all too much.

I approached another hill in the road up ahead. The line of students around me was beginning to slow down, and all of a sudden, I felt like running alone.

2. Past: 13 Days Ago

Ōhinata's request had come very abruptly, but she had likely been thinking about it for a while, biding her time and waiting for a chance to ask it.

That Friday, I hadn't intended on going to the clubroom. Because the inside of my wallet was barren and I had to consequently make do with a single butter roll and small milk carton for lunch, by the time after-school activities rolled around, I had become extremely hungry. Although I wasn't normally one to snack in-between meals, I wanted to go home as fast as I could to grab a bite.

As I headed for the entrance however, something like a huge group of girls suddenly began to crowd the entire width of the hallway and prevented anything aside from a snail-paced departure. Trying to push my way through them would only prove to be a pain, so I turned back. Before I realized it, I was in the connecting corridor leading to the Classics Club's classroom, so I headed over there, figuring I mind as well show my face.

Speaking out of consideration for my ravaged stomach, that was the correct decision. When I entered the clubroom, I saw three girls standing around a table looking in on something. These girls, Chitanda, Ibara, and Ōhinata, all turned to look at me. Ibara started to speak.

"It's almost like you came here targeting this."

"Targeting what?"

To that, Ōhinata played around and answered.

"We're about to open a box full of snacks."

What an incredible emotion it was that raced through my head at that very moment. I spoke, blindly driven by my lust for food.

"I feel like I'm about to collapse I'm so hungry. Please share some with me."

I ignored Ibara as she muttered, "it's almost like he's up to something, that was so straightforward," and added myself to the circle around the table.

The snacks inside the box were potato chips. "Chips Satsuma" was written on the side, so I figured they must have been made from sweet potatoes rather than regular ones.[38] It wasn't the first time that snacks had been laid out like this in the Earth Sciences lecture room. Chitanda had often brought snacks left over from gifts given to her family over the course of the year. The potato chips this time, however, were clearly something unrelated.

"Who brought these?"

"I did," said Ōhinata as she sheepishly raised her hand. "What? You can't eat them if I was the one that brought them?"

Why on earth had she said something like that I wonder.

"It doesn't matter whether a cat is white or black, if it brings you snacks it is a good cat."[39]

Ōhinata stared back with a puzzled face.

"Um, was that Zhou Enlai?"

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[38] Sweet potato in Japanese is *satsuma-imo*.

[39] Referencing a famous line by Chinese statesman Deng Xiaoping in 1961, "It doesn't matter whether a cat is white or black, if it catches mice it is a good cat."

“It was Lee Teng-hui, right?”

Ibara piped in from the side.

“Wasn’t it Chiang Kai-shek?”

As she listened to our back-and-forth, Chitanda showed an uneasy smile on her conflicted face.

“Umm, well, maybe it was Ho Chi Minh.”[40]

It felt like she was playing dumb on purpose. I had started something terrible. On the other hand, while it was true that I had actually forgotten the person behind the quote, I ended up remembering it during a discussion I had later on. It was Deng Xiaoping.

“Anyways, let’s just sit down.”

It was a sound suggestion. I went to grab a chair. Ōhinata took a cellphone out from her pocket and placed it on the table in front of her. I suppose if you were to leave it in your pocket while you sat down, it might get in the way.

The cover was removed from the box. And now, we feast.

Even though the chips were thick and had a consistency vaguely resembling polyethylene foam, it almost felt like eating a capsule fruit.[41] There was a faint sweetness to it as well.

“It really permeates throughout the body, doesn’t it?”

As I said this, Ōhinata couldn’t help but comment.

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[40] She mentioned a Vietnamese statesman instead of a Chinese one. Never change, Chitanda.

[41] A type of dry fruit that splits open to release seeds.

“You look like an old man drinking alcohol after getting out of the bath when you say that.”

I really wanted to ask her whether or not she had actually seen a middle-aged man say something like that while drinking alcohol after a bath.

“Wow, this is good.”

Ibara had muttered this almost as if without thinking. After hearing that, Ōhinata let out a huge smile.

“That’s great. My family loves these, so we picked up some.”

“Really? From where?”

Chitanda was focused on the box’s cover as she asked this.

“It says ‘Kagoshima Artisan Sweets’ on the box. JA Kagoshima… Even though it’s not in season, it certainly is very delicious. I guess you can sell it like this too, huh?”

Chitanda looked at the package with appraising eyes. I didn’t know whether or not Chitanda’s family was growing sweet potatoes as well, but she might’ve been sizing up JA Kagoshima as a business rival.

“You said you got it from Kagoshima? Do you have a relative living over there?”

I also thought it was strange that Ōhinata had known about a regional confection from Kagoshima, but if she did have a relative there, it would’ve made sense if she had gone there once before. As I jumped to this hasty conclusion however, Ōhinata immediately began to shake her head.

“No, no. I went to a concert over there.”

“A concert? In Kagoshima?”

Looking embarrassed, she responded, “It was in Fukuoka. These snacks were at a shop in Fukuoka.”

For a Kagoshima regional specialty to be sold in Fukuoka, just how far were they reaching out? I had a feeling that for Chitanda, a market of that size would be an enviable thing indeed. As Ibara continued to stack several chips on top of each other and bring them to her mouth, she started to talk.

“What concert did you go to in Fukuoka?”

Ōhinata winked and held up her index finger to her mouth.

“That’s a secret.”

“Oh really now?”

No matter who she had gone to see, even if it was someone zealously singing about devil worship or something like that, I doubt any of us would have viewed her any differently. But if she wanted to keep it a secret, then there was no reason to pursue it.

“But Fukuoka’s pretty far. Was that the only option?”

“No, it was a nationwide tour. I followed the band, although as expected, going to every event was impossible.”

“It was nationwide?”

Chitanda was the one who asked this.

“From Hokkaido to Okinawa?”

Ōhinata responded in a confused manner, “Umm, from Sendai to Fukuoka.” She then added in a frustrated tone, “The only one I couldn’t go to was their important Tokyo performance because the tickets were sold out.”

It wasn’t like I didn’t listen to music, but there was no way I could do something like follow a band on their nationwide tour. I was honestly moved by her determination.

“You really did a good job following them, didn’t you?”

For some reason, as I said this, Ōhinata seemed to become a little docile.

“This is just something a friend told me, but love gives generously.”

“It never runs out?”

As she heard this, she tilted her head in thought and showed me a bitter smile.

“After I listened to their newest album this time around, I feel like the stockpiles might be starting to run low.”

Even while we were talking, the four of us continued to reach out for more sweet potato chips. Perhaps it was because of the light yet pervasive sweetness and the exquisite feel in your mouth when you ate it, but it was impossible to stop after one. Meanwhile, I completely forgot about my empty stomach.

When I came to my senses, I noticed there was only one chip left. Ibara and I moved at exactly the same time. Our fingers suddenly stopped above the chip. It was a situation that could’ve been seen as being romantic by some, but there wasn’t an ounce of warmth in the gazes that we exchanged at that moment, only cold hostility.

“I’m glad you guys liked it so much.”

Neither of us paying any attention to Ōhinata, Ibara and I slowly started to retract out hands at the same time. Thinking that the other person was conceding the fight, both of us, once again at the same time, shot our arms forward and met in the middle. It wasn’t like I wanted the last chip so much that I was planning on holding my ground as a result, but…

The silence around us was awkward. I hesitated to do anything with my outstretched arm, nor could find the resolve in me to look at what kind of face Ibara was making. Chitanda, who had been watching the situation unfold, was about to mutter a nervous “umm” when we all heard a sound come to her rescue. Someone opened the door to the Earth Sciences lecture room.

All four of us turned to look at him at once. Satoshi stood there with a relaxed smile that looked as if it might’ve been humming. Ibara then spoke.

“It’s almost like you came here targeting this.”

Of course, Satoshi should have had absolutely no idea what was going on. Confused, he asked, “Targeting what?”

Ōhinata responded.

“We’re about to finish off a box full of snacks.”

And with that, the entire Classics Club had unexpectedly gathered in one spot. As Satoshi finished off the final chip, Ōhinata gazed around at everyone and finally got around to the heart of the matter.

“Now then, because you ate the snacks, there’s something that I’d like my beloved upperclassmen to do for me.”

By the time I realized that this was all planned from the start to bribe us, it was already too late. In doing this, all of us had traded our Saturday plans for Ōhinata’s sweet potato chips.

The weather reports weren’t looking very good, so I constantly worried about the impending rain. Fortunately, when I left the house the clouds were still while, and it looked like they would stay that way for a while. I didn’t know what time I’d be returning, however, so I put a compact umbrella in my tote bag just in case, although normally, I didn’t even have a bag with me; I would only carry a wallet in my pocket.

We were told to wait in front of Kaburaya Middle School’s front gate. Certainly enough, it was a location that all of us knew. On the school grounds were the soccer and track clubs, and additionally what was probably the tennis club, as they practiced. I took a cursory glance around, but I didn’t see anyone I recognized.

I had predicted that if anyone was going to show up late to our 3:00 appointment, it would be Satoshi, however my guess was off. Five minutes before that time, everyone, both Satoshi and I and well as Ibara and Ōhinata, had gathered. Although it was denim, just the fact that Ibara wore a skirt was alone entirely unexpected. Because it was rapidly becoming summer, Ōhinata wore a short-sleeved shirt.

“Sorry about this, for asking something so strange.”

Considering she was apologizing, she looked unexpectedly happy. Ibara and Satoshi also looked as if they were having fun while they said things like:

“This kind of thing is really rare. I’m looking forward to it.”

“I’m a bit excited. Don’t expect too much out of this, okay?”

…and so on and so on as they smiled back and forth. I didn’t say anything, but even my interest was somewhat aroused.

“It’s close by. I’ll show you the way.”

Ōhinata walked in front.

Our destination was a coffee shop, and it hadn’t yet opened. It wasn’t that the store hadn’t opened for the day, but rather that the store hadn’t even had its opening day yet.

“So your uncle works over there?”

As Satoshi said this, Ōhinata shook her head with a bitter smile.

“Didn’t I explain it to you? He's my cousin. Even though our ages are pretty far apart.”

I had also thought he was her uncle. I guess he’s an old cousin. I’ll have to remember that.

At any rate, according to yesterday’s story, one of Ōhinata’s relatives was opening up a new coffee shop, so we were asked if we could go in before they officially opened as test-guests. Just like Satoshi had mentioned, being able to enter a shop before it opened was a rare opportunity indeed. As we were essentially the first customers, it felt like some sort of honor.

Had Chitanda been here, it would have probably exposed her curiosity even more, however she wasn't. She had some inescapable business to attend to, and because she didn't know how long it would take, she couldn't make any promises. Yesterday, she had said, "I really want to go too, but… it'd probably be too late if we did it in the evening," clearly displaying her lingering attachment.

Personally, I was really looking forward to the opening of a new coffee shop. The shop that I had frequented somewhat, Pineapple Sand, had ended up relocating, so as a result, there weren't any shops nearby that a first-year in high school could really enter. Seeing that this shop looked like one that would be easy to walk in whenever really made me thankful.

"So what kind of shop is it?"

I said this while we were walking, but Ōhinata looked like she was deep in conversation with Ibara, so most likely she didn't hear me. Oh well, I'll be able to see it for myself in due time.

I ended up walking next to Satoshi.

He suddenly mentioned what had just been on my mind.

"This is pretty nostalgic, isn't it?"

"Yeah."

This was the route we had always taken to go to and from school. Because I had been essentially forced onto the Health Committee, there were times that I ended up leaving school late, and it was at times like those that we occasionally walked home together. It felt strangely unsettling to walk this path as a high school student in normal, weekend clothes.

“It almost feels like I’m doing something bad.”

As I said this, Satoshi quietly nodded.

“You’re right. I almost feel guilty.”

We had walked this route for three years, and in reality, this was the entire extent of our reach. Good things and bad things, our relationships with others and almost everything else has ended right here on this path. Kaburaya Middle School was a place that should’ve been filled with such warm familiarity, and yet, it felt strangely cold and distant. I felt out of place nearing the school I graduated from; I couldn’t help but feel like I was doing something taboo.

“Thinking back on it, I also remember not being able to get close to my elementary school after entering middle school.”

“Wasn’t it because of the uniforms?”

I wasn’t being serious of course. Satoshi also showed a bitter smile.

“Should we go pull out our middle school uniforms?”

I couldn’t even try to imagine doing that in an attempt to become reacquainted with the area. In the end, we no longer had a place in Kaburaya Middle School. If I absolutely wanted to be able to return, there was probably no other way than to get a job there.

As we seemingly became further and further separated from the school, and the voices from the school grounds could no longer reach us, Ōhinata finally stopped.

“Here we are.”

It was located in-between a soba shop and a private residence, and it faced a busy street.[42] The building wasn't a new one; rather, I could tell it was actually quite old when looking up at all of the rust and discoloration on the sheet-iron roof. In saying that, however, the glass door didn't have a single blemish, and the doorknob was polished to a shine.

"Wow, it looks pretty nice," said Ibara as she faced the cream-colored walls. I, on the other hand, was paying more attention to the windows. When judging whether or not a shop is easy for someone to casually enter for the first time, windows are of key importance. If the windows were too small or don't even exist in the first place, the shop might seem something like a relaxing secret base, but it would be much too imposing for a random passerby to enter. On the other hand, if the windows were too big, you would feel exposed while in the shop to the people outside, and it might be unnerving. This one, however, appeared to deftly avoid both of those possible problems. The windows were perfectly sized and had some small flower pots in them, containing blossoming red flowers. They were the kind you see often, but I couldn't remember the name. I saw Satoshi facing them as well, so I asked him.

"Satoshi, what are those?"

"They're flowers."

I only received this condescending answer. I lightly glared at him and he shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't know much about plants. Though Chitanda-san would probably know."

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[42] Soba is a type of Japanese noodle.

“Oh, that’s right!”

Ibara was the one who raised her voice. She pulled a cellphone from her pocket.

“I suddenly remembered when you mentioned Chi-chan’s name. She might already be done with her business today.”

“Is that so? I really do want her to come,” muttered Ōhinata as she turned the doorknob. “At any rate, let’s just go in for now.”

There was no sound when the glass door was pushed open. I guess they hadn’t put something like a customer bell on it yet.

I took a step inside, and before I realized it, I couldn’t speak. It wasn’t that the interior decoration was bad or anything. It was the smell of new wood, the smell of some disinfectant, and to add onto that, the smell of freshly-ground coffee beans. I was instantly assaulted by all of these at once, and it felt like my breathing might suddenly cease. Wouldn’t something like this be generally considered a terrible smell? I wondered if it was really okay for the place to smell like this, but considering it was just renovated, I suppose it couldn’t be helped. As I rationalized it to myself like this, I resumed my shallow breathing.

“So you guys came. Welcome.”

I finally noticed the man standing behind the counter as he said this.

Although he was supposedly a relative, he didn’t look like Ōhinata in the slightest. I guess stuff like that happens though. When I compare my sister to myself, there certainly are aspects that are similar, but there’re also aspects that are entirely different. Anyways, that aside, he was surprisingly mellow. In addition to his voice being quiet, whenever our eyes met, he would end up looking

away somewhat unnaturally. I wondered if that was any way to run a shop, but I suppose the owner of Pineapple Sand was also fairly emotionally distant. Thinking about it more, it was also possibly due to the fact that we were high school students and, as a result, not part of his intended targeted customer base that he skipped the warm reception.

“It has a bright atmosphere. I like it.”

As Ibara said this looking around at the also cream-colored shop interior, Satoshi spotted a painting on the wall and muttered to himself, “Oh hey, it’s Lautrec.”

I also turned to look at it.

There were seven seats at the counter and four tables. It was nice that there was a lot of room at them, but I couldn’t help but be disappointed at the fact that they were circular. When a table is round, I always end up feeling like everything will fall off from the very get-go.

The wall behind the shop owner at the counter was decorated with a relief. It looked like a heart lying flat on its side, but judging by the vine patterns surrounding it, it might have actually been a turnip instead. Inside that design were two rabbits facing each other. Although the owner seemed to be fairly emotionless, the relief was almost excessively sweet.

“Sorry there’s no music playing, it must make it feel kind of lonely around here. At any rate, please just relax for now and have a nice time.”

As he said this in a somewhat muffled voice, I couldn’t help but wonder if that was really necessary. I suppose that when this shop

eventually opens, he plans on playing some kind of radio station or something. I prefer the quiet, although I feel like my opinion rests in the minority. I should've probably just been happy that a shop like this opened up near me in the first place.

"It's almost ready, isn't it? Just a little longer to go!"

Ōhinata spoke in a much more familial manner than I had heard her talk at school. Even if two people were relatives, that doesn't say anything about how close they actually were. Not only were there siblings who were raised apart like strangers, but I'm sure there were also cases of cousins growing up together as well. Even though two of them looked quite far apart in terms of age, she seemed extremely attached to the shop owner. Ōhinata stood on her tiptoes and tried to look inside the kitchen.

"Ayumi-san isn't here today? I was thinking it'd be good practice for you."

When the show owner responded to Ōhinata, his expression didn't change one bit. Rather than being particularly cold to us, I suppose that's just what he was always like.

"We had business to take care of at the public office, so Ayumi is headed there at the moment. You can mention that next time you come."

"The practice is important! It'd be bad if you called Ayumi-san something like Po-chan in front of the customers."

Considering what Ōhinata said about us coming making for good practice, I could only assume that this "Ayumi-san" was to be the floor manager after the place opened. Was she the owner's wife? Maybe a girlfriend at least. If she was just a waitress that he hired, I

doubt he would have sent her to fill out paperwork at the public office.

Ōhinata turned around and then asked us a question that sounded like she was the waitress herself.

“What would you guys like? A table, or perhaps…”

Satoshi looked around the shop’s interior once more and then responded.

“It looks like all the tables are meant to fit four people. That might seem perfect right now, but we still don’t know if Chitanda is going to be coming later.”

“Oh, that’s right.”

Ōhinata nodded and then pulled out a stool from next to the counter before everyone else. We all followed in procession: Ōhinata, Ibara, Satoshi, then me, in that order. The stools were tall and weren’t fastened to the floor. They didn’t swivel however, so it didn’t feel unstable at all, and to add to that, there was something about the stool that just made it feel comfortable to sit on. Ibara began to stoke the brand-new counter with what resembled deep affection and then started to say rather uncharacteristically:

“I think this might be the first time I’ve ever sat at a counter like this. It’s almost like I’ve taken another step into adulthood.”

That adult must have had quite the low standards if something like that was a step to reach it. The owner lined up cups with water in them on the counter and started speaking to Ōhinata.

“I still can’t get rid of the paint thinner smell. I’m sure it will disappear in due time, though.”

“You better hope it does. The second I entered I knew there was a problem.”

Just like I had thought, I wasn’t the only one who was taken aback by the terrible stench. Strangely enough, however, I ended up already getting used to the smell. I didn’t really mind it at all.

“Apparently it’s because of the wallpaper adhesive… I give up. Oh, that’s right. I haven’t finished taking care of printing the menus yet.”

“That’s terrible though!”

As Ōhinata laughed while saying this, the shop owner finally broke out into a grin.

“It’s fine, I’ll just go over each thing one-by-one. I’d like for you guys to test the house blend though.”

“Is everyone okay with that?”

All of us lightly nodded in response to Ōhinata’s question, so she continued.

“Then we’ll have that and…”

Ōhinata leaned across the counter.

“Is there anything to eat?”

“Four house blends. If you’re looking for something light, I think I’d be able put out a couple different types of sandwiches.”

“Then I’ll sample them for you.”

That’s probably impossible, Ōhinata. Without thinking, I ended up muttering something in response.

“He probably doesn’t have any of the ingredients.”

“…Oh, maybe. Is that the case?”

The owner replied with a small “Pretty much” and then looked over towards me and did something like a compact nod. It might’ve been out of appreciation.

“I do have scones though. If you guys would like, I could get you some of those.”

Because he went out of his way, we took him up on that offer.

Perhaps he already had experience with this line of work or perhaps he was simply being deliberate with his actions this time around, but there wasn’t a single ounce of tension in his movements. Not only did he not appear restless in the slightest, but his every single action was performed carefully and without the slightest bit of unwarranted excess.

However, Ōhinata seemed to have a different impression.

“Come on, isn’t Ayumi-san’s belly going to get big before long? When that happens, will you really be able to do all of this by yourself?”

With this, I became certain that “Ayumi-san” was female. Thinking about it, I just realized the name could have potentially been a guy’s name as well.

As he lined up the saucers, the owner responded.

“It should be fine if we don’t have many customers, not that I’m hoping that that’ll be the case though…”

“Obviously. You shouldn’t stop until there are hordes of customers clawing at each other’s throats to get in.”

“I’ve never seen a café like that.”

That was to be expected.

“I guess you’re right. It’d be nice if you could work part-time here, Tomoko-chan.”

“Part-time, huh?”

Ōhinata sighed.

“I’m not even sure I’d be able to. I’ve never worked a part-time job before.”

“Everyone starts somewhere.”

“That’s not what I mean. You know what my dad’s like. He doesn’t allow it, even though he slashed my allowance.”

“Loans are rough. You should try to be more understanding.”

“He stupidly bought an expensive car and even affected me with his decision. And yet, he refuses to let me earn money on my own. It doesn’t make any sense at all.”

As she complained by herself, she suddenly looked like she realized that not only her cousin but her school seniors were present as well. She began to smile with embarrassment.

“You know how it is. There’s a lot going on.”

As the conversation came to a lull, I could hear the sound of a passing car outside. As she stared at a corner of the shop, Ibara slowly started to speak.

"The wooden shelving is nice. It doesn't look cheap at all."

I didn't even notice it was there until Ibara had mentioned that.

The low-rising shelf wasn't anything like a cheap, unpolished self-project. It was fashionable, for sure, but it didn't look like it could carry much. All of the books on it were fairly small.[43] There were several volumes, domestic works and international works being mixed together.

"I wonder if he reads a lot," said Satoshi to Ōhinata instead of asking the owner himself. Ōhinata seemed to struggle with the answer, but the owner raised his hand to stop her and answered.

"Not that much. The books over there are just ones I chose because I thought they looked cool."

"You mean you didn't put them over there because you wanted your customers to rea…"

"That didn't really cross my mind at all."

Although it was simply decoration according to him, I felt like he was just being humble. There was a magazine rack on the edge of the counter, but it only had a single stack of normal-looking magazines and newspapers. Satoshi followed my line of sight and started to stare at the rack as well.

"Oh hey, they have *Shinsou*."[44]

He pointed out the weekly publication sitting in front. Even I had heard of *Shinsou*, but it wasn't like it had particularly amazing journalism, nor was it even one of those tabloids that only covered

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[43] Specifically 127mm x 188mm.

[44] Literally translates to something like "the heart of the matter."

sex and scandals. I imagined it as some half-assed attempt at a magazine. I thought it was strange that Satoshi would be so interested in the kind of magazine that you could find anywhere.

"Ōhinata-san, could you do me a favor and grab that for me?"

"Oh, yeah."

Ōhinata was the closest to the rack at the end of the counter. She tried to yank it out, eventually needing to hold the rack down with one hand because everything was so tightly packed in it, and eventually pulled out the copy of *Shinsou*. As she handed it over to Satoshi and he flipped through the pages, Ibara asked him a question.

"What is it? Was there an article that caught your eye?"

"Yeah, something like that. It's rare for this kind of magazine to cover something from this city."

"Oh yeah? What's it about?"

"The Suitou Co. incident, of course."

Ibara responded with an "I see," and Ōhinata didn't act like anything particularly strange had happened. Everyone seemed to accept what Satoshi had said with some sort of mutual understanding and comprehension.

Essentially, I was the only one out of the loop.

"What's that?"

As I said this, Satoshi stared at me blankly, almost as if on purpose.

"What are you talking about, Hōtarō. You're joking, right?"

“I think I’ve heard the name before. If I remember correct, Suitou has something to do with picnics, right?”

Without even listening, Satoshi opened up the magazine to a certain page and showed it to me.

“It’s this.”

It was a small article. At around half a page, it resembled something like a small corner section devoted to random tidbits of domestic news. The headline, however, stood out quite a bit. This is what it said. “Big-name Corporate Extoritonist Runs Out of Luck Earning Easy Pocket Money” I would have been fine reading it, but we were still waiting for the coffee, so Satoshi just summed it up for me.

“There’s a company in this city called Suitou Co., and they recently started recruiting a lot of new employees. Anyways, a lot of these recruits were sent notifications of appointment and given training, and then after they were told to show up at the office in four months for their new job. When the four months had passed and they showed up at the office, however, no one at the company knew who the new employees were and why they were there. Essentially, no one had actually employed them.”

It all seemed pretty straightforward.

“Wait, let me try to guess the ending. I bet all the new recruits had to pay something like a uniform fee and materials fee when they were first employed, right?”

“Exactly. Although I guess that’s really the only possible explanation for it.”

Ibara looked at me in amazement.

“It was a pretty big deal in the news, and yet you still didn’t know about it? Are you sure you’re properly paying attention to what happens in the world?”

Just because I didn’t know about a single incident didn’t mean there was a need to say that. As I was about to say that, however, I figured there was no reason to escalate things like that, so I stayed silent.

“That’s a pretty simple case of fraud. Did they catch the perpetrator?”

“It wasn’t really something you could pull off without a list of the test-takers. It appears they caught the culprit surprisingly easily. Interestingly enough, the perpetrator’s father was apparently an infamous corporate extortionist as well. Maybe them finding out about it led to the father’s arrest. It might be written in the article.”

That was probably false.

“Has a parent ever been arrested because the child was?”

However, it seemed like Satoshi knew all about that as well. He shrugged.

“Maybe that’s why it only has a small corner section in *Shinsou*.

I see.

Satoshi pulled the copy of *Shinsou* away from my reach and started to stare at the open page.

“When I think of fraud, I can only imagine it a being something that only affects old people in companies. Let’s think of something similar. Let’s say last year, we got a notice saying, “You passed the Kamiyama High School entrance exam. Please pay the new student

entrance fee." You probably wouldn't assume you were being duped."

"I could understand that," said Ibara. "If you got a message saying your bid won at some on-site sale, you wouldn't really doubt it."

"On-site sale? You mean like a flea market?"

As I interjected with this, Ibara suddenly became quiet.

The owner then brought out the house blend coffees at the perfect time. Satoshi handed the copy of *Shinsou* back to Ōhinata and all of us turned to our coffee.

I suddenly felt like I somewhat understood the reason behind the rabbits on the decorative relief. On both the coffee cup's handle and the spoon's grip were little decorations of rabbits with pressed ears. Perhaps this meant that the shop owner or "Ayumi-san" liked them a lot. Maybe they were just born in the year of the rabbit.

Unfortunately, no matter how much I liked coffee, my sense of taste and smell were nowhere near capable of appreciating the exquisite intricacies of the house blend from a single cup. Saying "This is really good" was the most I could do; when I tried to think of a way to elaborate on that with some sort of comparison or detail, the words couldn't come out. Almost as if he wasn't even seeking those details in the first place, he changed the subject to something with seemingly more priority after hearing our praises.

"You add jam and cream to scones, but I have a couple kinds. There's strawberry jam and marmalade, and as for cream, you can have either the straight kind or mascarpone. What would you like?"

All of us gave our honest preferences, and yet it turned out to be something quite bothersome.

I chose strawberry jam and plain cream.

Satoshi chose marmalade and mascarpone.

Ibara chose marmalade and plain cream.

Ōhinata chose strawberry jam and mascarpone.

We were perfectly divided. For a split-second, I noticed shop owner's previously collected expression turn conflicted.

The jam and cream arrived before us, as well as two scones per person. Satoshi looked at all of us with a serious expression.

"Hōtarō, I have quite a lot of pride in my intimate knowledge of boring, random things."

"You don't have to tell me that. I'll say it for you. You have intimate knowledge of many a boring, random thing."

"It feels weird to hear someone else say it like that. Wait, that's not the point. What I'm saying is that I know the correct method by which one eats scones in England. Jam first…"

"So you cover the scone with jam before the cream?"

"Wait, cream first…"

"Well? Which is it?"

Satoshi stared at the scone plate and didn't respond. I guess he knew one of them was supposed to be used first, but he forgot which one that was.

Without waiting for the troubled Satoshi's answer, the shop owner casually told us instead.

“You put the jam on first. If you put the cream first on a warm scone, it’ll easily melt. But in the end, it’s completely up to how you like it.”

I see. It certainly did make a lot of sense. Even though he told us we could do whatever we wanted, none of us started with the cream after hearing that. As all of us started to eat, I suddenly heard a low noise ringing from somewhere. A cellphone was vibrating.

“Oh, it’s Chi-chan.”

Ibara stood up with the phone in her hand and immediately left the shop. I didn’t know this because I didn’t have a cellphone, but apparently talking on one in a face-to-face environment like this was really considered bad manners. It seemed like quite a hassle to use one.

Ibara quickly returned.

“She said she’s coming right now.”

“Does Chitanda-san know how to get here?”

“I told her to follow the path from Kaburaya Middle School until she hits the soba shop next door. I didn’t tell her the name of the shop but it should be fine.”

The banner outside the shop really stood out, so there was probably no need for concern.

After that, we started talking about the weather to kill some time.

“They said it was going to start raining in the evening.”

Although I said this without thinking much of it, Satoshi and Ibara were quick to counter me.

“That’s tomorrow isn’t it?”

“They said that the date changed.”

Ōhinata grinned broadly from the sidelines without taking a side.

“I wonder which report is older.”

I wasn’t confident in my report being the most recent one, however I stuck by it because it was the report I had seen.

“That’s what it said in the morning news…”

“I also watched the morning news.”

“Me too.”

Two versus one. The arbiter, Ōhinata, then handed down her ruling.

“By majority rule, Oreki-senpai’s memory has been deemed to be incorrect.”

To think I would be forced to accept the opposition. I thought it might be nice to see them drenched in the rain, tears streaming down their faces as they thought with self-reflection, “Ah, Hōtarō Oreki was truly right that time.”

While unintended, all of us took turns going to the restroom, and as I returned as the last one to do so, I saw Chitanda standing near the counter. Not even ten minutes had passed since she had talked with Ibara on the phone. She arrived pretty quickly. As I dried my hands with my handkerchief, I called over to her.

"You're already here?"

She responded with a happy grin.

"I was closeby."

Because Ōhinata sat at the furthest end of the counter, the only place Chitanda could sit was in the seat next to mine. We had decided to sit at the counter because the tables only had four seats, but having five people sit in a line was probably too long, and it was a somewhat uncomfortable situation to be in. I had just realized it, but because there were no other customers, we could have easily just taken a seat from a nearby table and sat with all five of us around the circle.

"So what were you doing today?" asked Ibara.

"It was one of my relative's *kiju* celebration.[45] I say relative, but I don't really know them too well. Anyways, I just had to give them my congratulations. After we greeted each other, they brought out the alcohol and I went to the kitchen to not cause any problems, but it ended up happening anyways."

"Something happened?"

"Kind of. It wasn't really much, but something did."

Chitada showed a slightly troubled smile on her face.

"When I went to go borrow their phone, it suddenly started to ring. Because there was no one around, I decided to take their message, but it ended up being terrible. It was an old lady with a strong accent and quiet voice so couldn't understand anything she was telling me. I didn't know if I should try to take the message or see if

[45] This is a special birthday in Japan that happens when one is 77 years old.

I could transfer it somehow… Just getting her to tell me her name was a challenge in itself. Had I not had to deal with that, I would have been able to come much more quickly."

"What?"

The one who raised her voice was Ōhinata. Even though there were three people in-between her and Chitanda, she leaned over the counter to get as close as she could to ask a question anyways.

"You said you were borrowing their phone? You mean at the house you were celebrating the birthday at, right? Is there really a place around here that doesn't get any signals?"

"Signals? Um…"

Chitanda looked confused. She likely had no idea what Ōhinata had meant by that. I decided to butt in before things became more complicated.

"Chitanda doesn't have a cellphone."

"…What?"

As she was at a loss for words, I suddenly felt like I had awakened some terrible beast. Ōhinata leaned even further forwards.

"Wait, but then… How can you get by? Like when you need to contact your friends. Isn't it bad when you can't contact them?"

"I suppose…"

Chitanda had a soft grin on her face.

"I deal with it somehow."

I also didn't have a cellphone, but for some reason I could feel the societal pressure start to creep around us this time. Between me and Chitanda, I wonder which of us would end up getting one first.

"That aside, a *kiju* celebration, huh? I suppose Chitanda-san really does have it tough."

As if to tease her, Satoshi began to talk.

"Really? This kind of thing happens to me once a year."

"I have never been to a distant relative's place to celebrate their birthday once in my entire life," muttered Ōhinata to herself as she sat at the edge of the counter.

Anyways, how old was someone when they had their *kiju* again? I felt like it had something to do with the number seven, but I wasn't sure. As I gave up on remembering, Chitanda began to speak with the shop owner.

"Would you also like the blend? If you'd like, I can heat up a scone for you as well."

"I'm actually not very good with caffeine; I'm sorry you went out of your way to call me over like this. It's a very wonderful shop, however."

Now that I think about it, I suppose that was the case, wasn't it. Whenever Chitanda drank anything with a lot of caffeine in it, she'd always become something else. For now, she was probably just referring to it messing up her ability to sleep. Certainly.

"Thank you very much, but I see."

After he mulled it over in his head for a little bit, he continued.

“Maybe it’d be best to have a non-caffeinated menu as well.”

No matter how you look at it, Chitanda was a rare case so there probably wasn’t any need to delve into that any further.

“At any rate, if that’s the case, I’m afraid to say there’s nothing I have that you could eat.”

“Don’t mind me. I’m sorry I arrived late in the first place anyways.”

And with that, Chitanda made do with a cup of water. As she started to drink it, however, she abruptly raised her head.

“This is… This isn’t tap water.”

She took another sip.

“Nor is it from a well or anything around that. It tastes like something from further upstream, most likely medium-hard water drawn from a spring higher up in the mountains. Am I right?”

The owner broke out into a smile and gave the tiniest of nods.

“It really is a shame I couldn’t have a customer like you try the blend.”

I also took some water and brought the cup to my lips.

“I see, it really is mellow.”

“Oh, I added lemon to that one, but it’s just tap water.”

What a world we live in.

As Chitanda held the cup with both hands, she peered around the shop.

“I'd be nice if I could drink the coffee as well. I'm glad that everything is going well at least.”

“Thank you very much.”

“What’s this café called?”

It was an obvious question.

And yet it opened the floodgates. Thinking about it now, it hadn’t been brought up even once in all of our discussions. I looked at Satoshi, he looked at Ōhinata, and she finally asked the owner in turn.

“What’s the name?”

However, even the shop owner clammed up with a “That’s, well…” Ōhinata pressed the question even further.

“No way. You can’t be telling me that you haven’t decided on it yet.”

“That’s not it. It’s just, well…”

The owner looked at Ōhinata with a pained expression.

“You’re going to laugh if I say it, Tomoko-chan, so I’m still keeping it secret.”

“It’s something that would make me laugh?”

He thought about it for a bit and then said, “I personally think it’s a good name. The second you see it, you’d know it belonged to a coffee shop.”

You’d think that in the time leading up to the shop’s opening, he would want to have the shop name already out there to publicize it. It felt a little strange to me that he was hiding it.

And, of course, Chitanda wouldn't let that "strange feeling" pass her by.

"Um… Then is the reason this shop doesn't have a signboard yet because you didn't want Ōhinata-san to see it?"

Now that she had mentioned it, I suppose there really wasn't a signboard in front of the shop, was there. If there was, we would have almost certainly noticed it. That said, it seemed highly unlikely that he put off the construction simply because he didn't want his cousin to laugh at him. As expected, he shook his head.

"The font is pretty elaborate so it's taking a long time to finish."

"When you say font, do you mean you're using the alphabet?"

"No, only kanji."[46]

As she heard this, Ōhinata let out a howl of delight.

"Kanji, huh! You're right, I might actually laugh. After all, you have a laughable sense for kanji!"

She then turned to face us with an expression full of happiness.

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[46] WARNING: From here on, there will be a lot of discussions involving kanji and its potential wordplay, so I'll try to condense a quick crash course here for those who don't know much about it. Kanji are characters in Japanese deriving from Chinese, and as a result, you can read them several ways, those ways usually stemming from traditional Japanese or Chinese readings. While each kanji usually has a distinct meaning associated with it, you can combine the Chinese readings to produce something that sounds like something else, while still maintaining the meaning associated with each individual kanji. The combination of kanji and unique readings associated with them form an important aspect of Japanese wordplay.

"This is the same guy that took the *ai* (love) from *aizen-myouou* (Rāgarāja) and *ra* (silk) from *akki-rasetsu* (Rakshasa), among others, to make *ai ra-bu yuu* (I love you)."[47]

Rāgarāja, huh? At any rate, the words she chose to demonstrate her point were beyond terrible. Ibara looked like she was torn between laughing and staying silent.

"What the heck's up with those examples? Were you born to a Buddhist temple or something, Hina-chan?"

Was there really a first-year in high school that knew about things like Rāgarāja and Rakshasa? As I thought this, Ōhinata's tanned cheeks started to turn red.

"No, I was just born to a lowly salaryman. I couldn't think of any other words, so it doesn't matter, does it?! I mean, what would you say if it were you, senpai?"

Ibara immediately responded.

"The *ai* from *aichi-ken* (Aichi Prefecture) and the *ra* from *koura* (shell)."

Wow. That was a pretty impression selection. All of us spoke up in admiration.

On the other hand, I could have sworn I heard the shop owner stealthily mutter something like, "You're close."

"So the shop's name is still a secret? Hehehe, I'm curious!"

As least she was having fun.

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[47] Rāgarāja: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/R%C4%81gar%C4%81ja, Rakshasa: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rakshasa

“Kanji, huh?”

As he said this, Satoshi folded his arms.

“If we’re talking about kanji used in coffee shops you often see ‘to wait’ (*tai*) and ‘dream’ (*mu*) used in conjunction to make ‘Coffee Time’ (*tai* + *mu*).”

“I know what you mean.”

Ōhinata nodded, and the owner also said, “It’s along those lines.”

By saying his shop name was along the lines of that “tai+mu” wordplay, was he saying he used the same characters? I assumed that was the case, but Ibara had a different idea.

“When you say ‘used a lot’, do you mean like the jewel radical in ‘coffee shop’?”

“Jewel radical? Isn’t it the king radical?”

“Although it looks like king, it’s called a jewel radical,” replied Ōhinata to my question.[48] Where did she even learn something like that. Without thinking, I turned to Satoshi, but he shook his head in the same confused manner, as if he were saying, “I had no idea either.”

Ibara’s knowledge might have been correct in that one instance, but the rest of her answer was off.

“That’s not it.”

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[48] Radicals refer to the various components that make up a kanji. ‘Coffee shop’ is written in kanji as such: 珈琲館 Notice the left parts of the first two characters. Ibara and Hōtarō were debating if that radical was either jewel (玉) or king (王), when Ōhinata mentioned that the king radical is actually confusingly called the jewel radical. See? Even Japanese people have trouble with kanji.

Then, as if in amusement, the owner also added, “You’re correct about it being three characters though.”

“Then…”

As Satoshi said this however, Ōhinata quickly stopped him with her out stretched hand.

“That won’t do, senpai. Let me try to figure it out.”

“Well then, let’s make a competition out of it.”

However, Ōhinata was unexpectedly serious.

“This is just something a friend told ma, but you only get three tries to guess a name as has been the case since ancient times.”

Was that so. If it was decided in ancient times, I guess there was nothing we could do about that. Satoshi started to tilt his head and wonder, “I would be able to understand if it was three days, but…” however he quickly gave up seeing Ōhinata’s resolve.

“So give us a hint! A hint!”

For the briefest of moments, I saw the owner look at the noisy Ōhinata with an incredibly kind expression on his face. It might’ve been a hasty deduction on my part, but I started to wonder if he had always played with Ōhinata in this pure, childlike manner ever since she was a small girl. Then, almost as if he wasn’t serious about wanting to keep the shop’s name a secret in the first place, he gave a hint.

“The name on the signboard is just like it is.”

“Signboard… What? Isn’t that obvious though?”

“Since you only get three tries, you should think carefully about it. If you end up getting it right, I’ll give you something nice.”

Ōhinata’s expression immediately exploded into brilliance.

“I’ll definitely get it right. Just you wait.”

She then ferociously pointed her index finger towards all of us.

“You heard me. I’ll definitely get it right, so none of you need to say anything from here on.”

For the first time since meeting her, I thought that this lively first-year in front of me was pretty childlike. I didn’t mean that like I suddenly saw some annoyingly juvenile side of her. If I had to choose, I would probably say that it was endearing. I might’ve even been smiling.

A clock was mounted on the wall, and even that had a rabbit on it. At some point, the hour hand had already reached five o’clock. We had been here for a surprisingly lengthy amount of time.

Perhaps because she was thinking, Ōhinata rarely opened her mouth as we talked. I had already finished off the coffee and didn’t even have the cup in front of me anymore. I assumed it was going to rain in the evening, so I wanted to leave before that happened. As everyone was slowly running out of things to say, I decided to take the opportunity to say it then.

“Well then, I think it’s about time.”

As I said that single line however, Ōhinata seemed to suddenly look nervous. She looked up at the clock and had an expression that seemed to ask where all the time had gone. She quickly reverted to her usual smile.

"Oh, by the way!" she exclaimed. "Do you guys have a sec? There was something I wanted to ask."

Most likely this was just a ploy to give her more time to try and figure out the shop's name. It appeared that I was the only one who noticed her earlier moment of panic. The other three didn't seem to think that she had just pulled something quickly out of thin air to distract them.

"What is it?"

Ōhinata didn't look at Ibara, the one who asked this, but rather at Chitanda.

"Chitanda-senpai, your face is big, isn't it."[49]

"My face is…"

As Chitanda muttered this to herself, Ibara quickly interjected.

"It's okay, that's not what it means. You have a thin face, Chi-chan."

"No, I understood what it meant. I was just really surprised."

She rested her hand on her chest.

"Umm, I wouldn't say I know that many people, but I do meet a lot of people through my family's official business."

"Then," Ōhinata gulped and then nervously continued in a manner very unlike her, "would you know someone, like say, Agawa?"

"Agawa-san?"

Chitanda lowered her head slightly.

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[49] An expression meaning to know a lot of people from different walks of life.

“Are you talking about the first-year, Sachi Agawa-san?”

“Ah, yes.”

Ōhinata’s body sank back like it was sapped of all its strength. Satoshi and Ibara sat between us so I couldn’t see what kind of expression she was making.

“Did something happen to Agawa-san?”

“No… I just wanted to know if you knew her.”

Chitanda, who sat on the other side of me, had a blatantly puzzled expression as well. But I thought that there might have been something off about her appearance; she didn’t say “Did something happen to Agawa-san? I’m curious.” Ōhinata remained silent, so the atmosphere became strained around us.

“Umm, well then,” I said once more as I saw what was happening to everyone around me at the counter, “shall we get going?”

Everything was on the house, apparently. I felt bad leaving it at that because business was just starting for him, but the owner told me that the register wasn’t working yet anyways, so the first customers would be able to enjoy tax free food because it was a pain to calculate it manually. I’m fairly certain it was all a façade, however. Satoshi and Ibara, as well as Ōhinata, were all close to the door. I was next to the cash register with the owner, and Chitanda stood next to me.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t drink the coffee even though you went through all this trouble to let us come in early.”

The owner only smiled as Chitanda lowered her head. I had thought he was an emotionless man, but I guess I was completely wrong about that. Maybe he was somewhat nervous because we were his first customers.

“Don’t worry. Coffee isn’t something you absolutely need to drink.”

“This…”

As she started to speak, Chitanda suddenly tripped over her words. It appeared she was about to say the name of the shop. However, the name wasn’t known to us, of course. She ended up saying, “Th… this shop… I hope it does well,” as well as other things of that nature.

Chitanda then suddenly turned to face me.

“Um, Oreki-san. I know we’ll be able to see it when the shop eventually opens, but I… well, you see… just a little, well… um… I’m curious.”

Ōhinata didn't want us to solve the mystery behind the name for her, but that didn’t necessarily mean that I had to wait. I didn’t understand anything about the unnatural things she had said and done prior, but at least I had a chance of solving this different issue at hand.

Fortunately, there were a notepad and ballpoint pen near the register.

“Can I borrow those?”

“Oh, sure.”

“Thanks. If I do it alone, it won’t count against her three tries I’m sure.”

I then started to scribble on the notepad. Chitanda peeked over my hand."

"…What?"

There were three kanji lined up next to each other.

The first one meant "to walk."

The next one meant "alongside."

And the final one meant "rabbit."

This shop's name had several conditions.

"If Ōhinata heard it, she would laugh."

"Anyone would be able to see it was a coffee shop just by looking at the name."

"It was along the same line as 'Coffee Time.'"

"It wasn't 'Coffee Shop.'"

"The shop name only consisted of three kanji."

And finally was the hint given by the shop owner: "The name on the signboard is just like it is."

What exactly was the signboard, then? So far, there was no physical representation of the signboard. So what was it? There were two possibilities.

The first was "the poster girl," or in other words, "Ayumi-san." It was possible to write her name using three kanji, but no matter which ones you used, no one would be able to tell it was a coffee shop.

The other option was for it to be a "menu sign." If that were the case, it'd go without saying that the item he'd choose for it would be coffee. He didn't seem very interested in the light meals, and it's not like coffee shops tended to be famous for their scones or sandwiches in the first place. On top of that, it seems like he didn't use the original kanji for coffee, either. In that case…

"You said the name of the shop was the name of the sign itself, didn't you. And the poster item in this shop is the house *blend*, am I correct?"

"Oh, I see."

Chitanda spoke up.

"I also noticed he said 'it's a shame you couldn't try our blend' instead of saying 'our coffee.'"

I nodded. It seemed like he placed an unnatural emphasis on calling the coffee the house blend.

If that was the name of the shop, then how would you write it in kanji? The answer was similar to the earlier "Coffee Time" example. Just like I had thought when I heard it originally, there were specific characters used. When splitting up the word blend (*burendo*) into three parts, you can only really do so like this: *bu-ren-do*. It wouldn't really work any other way.

My first thought was the kanji for rabbit, which can be read as *do*. There were pictures of rabbits everywhere in this shop, on the cups, on the spoons, and on the clock. Most importantly, there was even the large relief with the two rabbits on the wall behind the counter. I was almost certain there was a correlation between the amount of rabbits and the shop's name having something to do with them.

My next guess was the kanji meaning "walking." There weren't many kanji that would be pronounced *bu* that also might have something to do with the coffee shop. He mostly likely wouldn't have used the ones meaning "incorrect" or "to despise," and the ones meaning "to stroke" and "absoluteness" were much too difficult to be in a name. I thought it might be the one meaning "to dance," but even that seemed too splendid for a simple coffee shop. Thinking about it once more, I remembered "Ayumi-san."

I was simply guessing at the characters in the apparently pregnant Ayumi-san's name. Earlier, when talking to the owner, Ōhinata had mentioned, "It'd be bad if you called Ayumi-san something like Po-chan in front of the customers." If her name was "Ayumi-san" but her nickname was "Po-chan" then her name most likely contained the kanji for "walking." Whether or not it was the only character in her name, I had no idea. At any rate, the character was commonly read as *bu*, so there was no problem putting it on the sign.

That left the *ren*. This was the most difficult one.

The shop owner said that Ōhinata would laugh once she learned the name of the place. Would Ōhinata really laugh about putting Ayumi-san's character in the title, when she herself wasn't in a relationship? She might, I suppose, but I personally didn't think it was that embarrassing. This meant he was probably talking about the *ren* as being the embarrassing point.

On the relief on the wall, there were *two* rabbits inside the heart.

"Ayumi-san" (*bu*) "alongside" (*ren*) the "rabbit" (*do*). *Burendo*, or "Blend." The shop owner thought silently about it.

He looked down at the notepad and up at me, and then cracked a smile.

“That’s nice.”

“What do I get?”

However the shop owner simply laughed as he shook his head.

“You were close.”

I was off, huh?

It wasn’t a shock. I didn’t have a lot of confidence in it in the first place. I thought that the *bu* and the *do* were good choices, but I still felt unsure about the *ren* until the very end. Just as I expected, the owner took the ballpoint pen and underlined the *ren*.

I then looked at what he wrote next to it and suddenly realized what made it so embarrassing for him. The middle kanji in the new, upcoming coffee shop’s name was “to adore.” The rabbits adored by Ayumi. I had previously thought the owner was somewhat callous, but to think he was such a romantic. Had Ōhinata heard this, she would have most certainly smiled. It would have been a smile so bright it could have pierced through any depth.

However, Chitanda alone remained confused.

“Um, why is it the kanji for ‘walking?’”

That’s right, she wasn’t here when we were talking about “Ayumi-san.” I didn’t want to keep the others waiting too long, so I kept it brief.

“I’ll explain it to you on the way back.”

Chitanda replied quietly, “Please do.”

I went to make sure we didn't leave any belongings on the counter, and I saw that only the cups, plates, and spoons remained. Before I left the shop, I suddenly realized something. The newspaper sitting in the front of the magazine rack was the evening edition. I quickly rushed over to it and picked it out with my index and middle finger. I looked at the weather report and saw that it said it would start raining in the evening. I handed it over to Satoshi and flashed a triumphant look.

"See? Look at that. It says it's going to rain in the evening."

"Are you still hung up on that? I didn't know you held grudges like this, Hōtarō."

That wasn't what I had intended. Ibara, who had already been standing in front of the door, turned around.

"Even without that, you could tell just by looking outside. See?"

Looking outside the glass door, I could see rain drops beginning to fall.

Even though I had known the report ahead of time, I ended up not even being able to leave before I had to deal with it. At least the compact umbrella wasn't going to be useless after all.

3. Present: 11.5km; 8.5km Remaining

As I reflected back on this, I cemented my belief that there was at least one strange thing with what had happened that day. Something that wasn't the case when I walked into the shop for the first time but was the case after I left it. I couldn't imagine that it was simply a coincidence. Someone did it on purpose. It was connected with the question about what to do with the lucky cat on my birthday, so to speak.

As I traced further back into my memories, a thought started to amass in my head. At this point, however, it still remained nothing more than an ambiguous idea. In the end, I needed to ask her for her side of the story.

The mountain-pass stopped rising. A small collection of houses started to fan out from below my vision. It was Jinde, the place where Chitanda's house was located.

By this point, my approximation of the distance between me and Chitanda was already beyond salvation. As I ran and walked, my pace continued to change all over the place.

And yet, for some reason, I felt like I'd be able to talk with her once I reached the end of the decline and finally entered the area called Jinde.

Chapter 4 - Easier to Just Let Go

1. Present: 14.3km; 5.7km Remaining

Around what I think was ten years ago, I had walked a fairly long distance with my sister. Apparently they were going to be tearing down an old community center and my older sister decided to take me along with her to go see it, excitingly wondering if they were going to destroy it with explosives. Actually, I'm fairly certain I was equally as excited. If I could go back in time, I would have wanted to grab my shoulders from behind and tell myself with a smile, "There's no way that'd happen." At any rate, the two of us fervently walked and walked. Even when I was on the verge of tears, she'd tell me, "It'll definitely be amazing!" and I would continue pressing forward. I was a tenacious child, wasn't I?

Of course, they used heavy machinery to assist with the demolition without a single explosive in sight, but I don't really remember feeling disappointed as a result. I think the sight of a giant building being destroyed with various crunchings and gnawings was definitely enough to satisfy me.

What I vividly remembered, however, was the brutal road home. The excitement of the trip going there had already become a thing of the past, so I blindly followed on an unknown road without even remotely knowing where we were, my stomach growling and the sun setting. As I dawdled behind, my sister said this to me.

"If you keep stopping while you walk, your legs will really start to hurt. Make sure you keep up with me."

Was I able to make it all the way back home on my own that day? I didn't remember.

Of course, the reason I even recalled this in the first place was because my legs started to hurt as I constantly switched between walking and running. Specifically, it was the joint in my right leg that started to flare up with pain. Had it been my feet or calves, hell even my spleen, that had hurt instead, I would have been able to accept it as being something inevitable, but why did it have to hurt there?

The downward slope had all but ended.

I intentionally raised my head and saw a vast scene in front of me containing sprawling, green rice paddies that were sparsely dotted with several estates. Perhaps they hadn't cleaned it up yet, or perhaps they simply combined the Boys' and Peach festivals in this area, but I could see flying carp banners on the houses in the distance.[50] I saw the form of the wind as it flew through the banners, creating wave-like ripples, and finally felt it as it refreshingly blew over my body. The sun had already risen, but I didn't feel any discomforting heat from it. For the first time since I had begun the race on the school grounds, I felt like running a little bit. The point at which I actually wanted to run was, of course, also the point at which I could no longer bear the pain in my leg.

It probably wasn't too big of a deal, but just to be sure, I slowed down and came to a stop. A white flower had bloomed on the side of the road. Even someone thoughtless and insensitive like me could understand the beauty of nature. It was a lily bell. As I stared

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[50] Boys' Festival, taking place on May 5th, is often celebrated by hanging carp-like tube banners that flow in the wind.

fixedly at the small flower without really paying attention, I touched the leg joint with my palm. I tried pressing down on it and then tried hitting it.

"Well, if this is all…"

The pain hadn't subsided, but putting pressure on the area didn't really seem to make it any worse. It didn't feel stiff either. As I finished making sure that it would probably be fine and went to start running again, a harsh voice called out from behind me.

"How about you start running seriously, you piece of shit?"

I raised my head wondering what happened and saw Nanigashi, a boy who was in my class last year, as he ran past me.

I didn't know much about him. Even though we were in the same class, we didn't really talk at all. Thinking about it, actually, I remembered hearing that same tone of voice from a while back. It was before winter break, when all of the students were cleaning up the school facilities. The trashcan had filled up, but when I went to empty it, he yelled at me with an extremely loathing voice, "You're not going." Perhaps thinking that he was just looking forward to doing it himself, I simply left without saying anything in return.

If he had known I was in Class A, he probably would have been confused to see me all the way back here. What confused me, however, was the harsh severity in his tone. I suppose somewhat unsurprisingly, it appeared that he held some deep-seated hostility with regards to me. I had no memory of me doing anything to him, but whatever it was, it probably got on his nerves regardless. Maybe he was just irritable from all the running.

If I started running now, I would end up following right behind him, and I didn't like the sound of that no matter how I sliced it. My legs were probably fine, but I decided to walk for a while regardless.

As several students passed me, I started thinking about the act of disliking something.

I don't consider myself to be the type of person that stands out and makes enemies, but I'm also not really the type of person that's loved by others either. If I were to involve myself with a hundred or so people, there'd probably be some that would absolutely not be able to stand me. After all, no matter how favorably you might try to frame me, I wasn't the kind of person that took an active role in a group setting. There were many times when I expressed flagrant disinterest in class activities. And, of course, even though I was then a recipient of all the cold, silent stares that judged me due to my nonparticipation, how should I put this, even then I was the kind of person that didn't care. Maybe it could even be called indifference.

That said, I really didn't want to approach the people that did genuinely hate me. The fact that I was walking was even a testament to that. I was different from Satoshi in that regard.

That guy never shied away from things like dealing with others, so he constantly showed his face everywhere. As well as lent a hand. And also ran his mouth. Though, in saying that, it wasn't like he was intrusive or anything. Rather than being the type that said, "Leave it all to me," he never pushed any further than, "Let me help out just a little bit." He never did anything irresponsible like that. Occasionally, there were times when his intentions were misunderstood due to his incessant flippancy. However in the end, even if he was fully aware that he was hated, he would still go out

there regardless. Essentially, he was even less concerned about what others thought of him than I was. Perhaps this was also indifference.

But there were also those extremely far removed from that indifference. Thanks to Nanigashi's violent swearing, I suddenly recalled something. I felt like I had heard a similar story yesterday.

Except, the only ones who could talk about its contents were probably the two directly involved.

There was a bus stop on the side of the road.

Thankfully, there was also a small waiting area with a roof over it. The sheet iron walls were spotted with rust; the nailed-in sign had an old-looking font and glossy enamel finish. The bench was made out of plastic, and although the structure looked like it was supposed to be able to stave off a typhoon, the constant weathering made it appear somewhat fragile. In actuality, there was a large fissure stretching across it. A portion of it had faded and none of the pieces had fallen. It didn't look like it had split recently.

It was the perfect place to watch the Kamiyama High School students as they passed by. I nonchalantly stepped inside the structure and pressed myself against the shady portion as if to hide myself. As long as I waited, I'd be able to catch Chitanda when she came.

Even though Nanigashi had hissed at me to run, I ended up not even walking. There was more or less a reason for doing this.

This morning, before I had even left the starting line, I came up with an idea. Yesterday, there were three of us in the Earth Sciences

lecture room: Chitanda, Ōhinata, and I. Afterwards came Ibara, who told us that Ōhinata said she was going to leave the club. As a basic summary, none of that was incorrect.

My recollections ended there, however, and the rest of the stories I heard from Ibara and Satoshi later on only served to illustrate just how important those dozens of minutes after school truly were. Saying "I was reading a book at the time so I don't remember anything" wouldn't cut it. As I realized this, a memory that I once deemed meaningless and threw out as a result resurfaced once more.

Setting aside if it's even true or not, Chitanda believed that Ōhinata quitting was her fault and took the responsibility for it on herself. Even had I shamelessly got up and chased after her, saying, "I might be able to help, so please tell me the entire story," she would have likely just shook her head silently. She was the kind of person that wouldn't bend after something like that.

I had to stop Chitanda.

To that end, I absolutely had to remember what exactly happened yesterday after school and present her with a single inference. In other words, an inference explaining why Chitanda thought she herself was responsible for Ōhinata quitting.

I felt like I might know why.

2. Past: Approximately 19 Hours and 30 Minutes Ago

I hadn't realized it ahead of time, but it was still too early for it to be evening outside. I left the 2-A classroom on the third floor and casually strolled over to the Classics Club room, to the Earth Sciences lecture room. I only had a little left to go before I finished the paperback I was carrying with me, so I thought I'd go over there to read it.

Students getting ready to leave were coming and going all throughout the hallway. There was a student pinning up posters on the bulletin board, but I couldn't tell which club he was from. A student carrying a massive cardboard box in both hands, her head constantly peeking out from the left and right to see where she was going, passed by me. It was the same scene I had always been witness to after school; I could hear the high-pitched laughter and low-pitched bustle all around me. I stuck both of my hands inside my pockets. I still had the change in there from when I bought lunch, so I started playing around with the coins.

You had to pass through the connecting corridor to go the special wing of the school that housed our clubroom. It was constructed on the second floor, but if it was sunny out, you could also pass through on its roof, accessible on the third floor. I walked out onto that breezy roof and could hear the high-pitched sounds of the Baseball Club's metal bats striking multiple balls.

Generally in Kamiyama High School, you could always hear the echoing sounds of the Brass Band and Acapella Clubs as they practiced after school, but it was quiet that day. I saw a girl I had never seen before leaning over the rusted handrail, wearing a melancholic expression that seemed to be saying there was not a

single happy thing that existed on this planet. Had the sun been a bit lower, it might've made for an excellent painting.

I climbed the stairs up to the fourth floor. There was another bulletin board hanging in the level area between the alternating stairs, but new-student recruit had already ended so the brown of the cork stood out. The sole poster still on it featured a beautiful, grinning actress with the caption "Wait up! There's a way for you to live a bright life as well!" written at the bottom. I had no idea what it was trying to say.

This year, the only two clubs on the fourth floor of the special wing were the Classics Club and the Astronomy Club. The Astronomy Club could occasion get noise, but yesterday they were so quiet you could hear a pin drop. As I headed towards the Earth Sciences lecture room through the vacant hallway I suddenly stopped, almost falling forwards.

The door to an empty classroom stood slid open. A person remained dangling from the doorframe above it.

As disturbing as it was, I had actually thought for a split-second that someone had hanged themselves there. How could you be so hasty, even though there was a way for you to live a bright life as well?!

I quickly realized that that wasn't the case however. The person was hanging onto the frame with both hands.

The dangling person was a girl wearing a sailor uniform, but I could only see her profile because she faced the closed section of the door. In reality, however, that should have been plenty for me to figure out who it was. I looked at her feet and saw that her navy-colored socks were completely separated from the floor. I thought

about calling out to her but hesitated. Perhaps this wasn't something that she wanted someone else to see, and I should be sympathetic and simply continue walking along like nothing even happened in the first place.

However, the consideration ended up being in vain. I thought I hadn't made any noise, but she seemed to notice me anyways. As she did, she let loose a little yelp and released her grip, colliding into the door with an excess of energy and falling back onto her butt. She quickly stood up in an embarrassed manner and then started to act like nothing had happened.

"Good afternoon."

What a polite greeting.

"Yeah, good afternoon."

"Nice weather out, isn't it?"

"No kidding."

Why had Tomoko Ōhinata been hanging from a doorframe on the fourth floor in the special wing after school? Had Chitanda been here, this would have turned into a profound mystery of the upmost priority. Smiling brightly, Ōhinata brought her hands behind her to nonchalantly brush off the back of her skirt.

Most likely because she already knew I saw, her acting was half-assed. I tried to ask what she was doing in the most harmless manner I could muster, but I couldn't think of what to say.

"Umm…"

I waved my index finger around for no real reason, and then it suddenly dawned on me.

“You were trying that out, right? You were trying to extend your back?”

To this absolutely terrible attempt at consolation, she smiled bitterly.

“I’m pretty sure my back wouldn’t extend with that. If anything, my arms would.”

“Then you were trying to extend your arms?”

“Well yeah, something like that.”

With this lie, she began to look outside, beyond the window. She then looked at me out of the corner of her eyes and asked me a question this time.

“Are you planning on going to the clubroom right now?”

“Yeah.”

“I see.”

She muttered this in a casual manner, but I could tell that it went contrary to what she wanted. She had probably assumed I wasn’t going to show up. Well, it was never really known for sure who was going to show up on any given day. People came if they felt like it; that much hadn’t changed, even after a year had passed.

At the end of the hallway, I could see that door to the Earth Sciences lecture room was currently being kept open, possibly for ventilation purposes.

“It looks like somebody is already in there.”

As she stared at the opened door, she responded.

“It’s the president.”

“Chitanda, huh?”

“Fukube-senpai is apparently at a General Committee meeting. He came for a little bit and then left right after.”

Satoshi had tomorrow’s Hoshigaya Cup to prepare for. I was more uncertain as to why he even came to the clubroom in the first place.

“Busy like always, I guess.”

Ōhinata nodded with a slight smile.

“That seems to be the case. Even this weekend, he…”

She then stopped speaking midway. Suddenly, she asked a question with a serious expression that looked as if it were skirting around some deep secret.

“You’re Fukube-senpai’s friend, Oreki-senpai, so you know, right?”

While not as bad as Chitanda, I noticed that Ōhinata also had a habit of omitting important details when she talked. With Chitanda, she would often move a conversation far too quickly and then suddenly drop it on a dime. Ōhinata, on the other hand, seemed to constantly think that she could omit certain details because the other party would know what she was talking about due to the subject being so intimate to them.

I mentioned that Satoshi was a busy person. Ōhinata agreed and then started to mention something about the weekend. I couldn’t say I knew Satoshi’s weekend plans, but I could guess that it was something that kept him busy. If pressed, I guess there was one thing I knew about, but it wasn’t really that easy to talk about.

“For the most part. You?”

“I heard about it from someone I know in my class.”

“Someone you know?”

No matter which way you looked at it, a single first-year classroom wasn’t big enough for these kinds of rumors to get around.

“Are you friends with Satoshi’s little sister?”

“Kind of. Only to the extent that we eat lunch with each other.”

“I haven’t talked with her much, but she’s a pretty strange one, isn’t she?”

Ōhinata tilted her head in thought.

“She’s certainly unusual, but not enough to where I’d call her strange. I’d say Fukube-senpai is stranger.”

With that, she became quiet.

Well then, I wonder what exactly it was that Ōhinata had heard from Satoshi’s slightly unusual little sister.

The both of us seemed to be watching each other’s expressions. I tried to gauge how much she knew and how much I could tell her before things might become problematic, and it created a silence between us that made it difficult to breathe.

I grew tired of the pussyfooting. Why did I have to talk about Satoshi like I was about to touch a burning pot again? I ended up speaking loosely.

“It’s about Satoshi and Ibara, right?”

Ōhinata drew a deep breath of relief and softened her expression.

"Yeah, that's right. I guess you knew after all."

Ibara had liked Satoshi for a long time now. At the latest, I learned about in the winter of our third year in middle school. Satoshi had continued to evade the matter, but I, intending to neither cheer on Ibara nor support Satoshi, didn't observe what became of it in the slightest.

That said, I heard that over Spring break Satoshi had finally stopped his running and hiding. Ever since then, it seems that his weekends have been consistently busy.

"This is just something that she told me, but…"

Up until this moment, I had never been blessed with the opportunity to gossip with a female student over some rumor. I'm sure anyone in this position right now would have undoubtedly had a happy expression looking as if it were submerged in some guilty pleasure. I remained silent as she continued.

"Since the two of them started dating, for three days now, Fukube-senpai's become some pitiful creature that can only repeat 'I'm sorry' over and over, like he's supposed to be apologizing to Ibara-senpai for some reason. Did something happen?"

Oh come on. To think Satoshi's situation would be found out by his sister and even passed along to his junior, talk about a pitiful story. At least the saving grace was the fact that Ōhinata apparently didn't know any of the specifics. Certainly enough, in order to remedy the fact that he had put off his answer for over a year, Satoshi probably had a lot of things he needed to tell her.

That said, I really wasn't all that interested. I prepared a brief answer to appease Ōhinata as she looked at me expectantly.

“He was probably just apologizing for making her wait so long when he didn’t deserve her patience in the first place.”

As I said something bewildering like this, Ōhinata sat there dumbfounded for a second.

I had assumed she was going to question me further, but instead, she smiled unexpectedly and simply said this:

“How nice. I like how friendly it all sounds when you say it like that.”

I didn’t know how to respond. Ōhinata continued to stare at me, and then quietly stopped smiling. As I tried to force some idle chitchat between us, she stopped me and said, “Um, senpai.”

“Yeah?”

I stopped and turned around. Calling out to me, Ōhinata started to mumble in a garbled manner, “Umm, well,” and then finally resumed like she had given up on what she was trying to say.

“Please wait up for a second.”

She then headed back over towards the doorframe she was previously hanging from and jumped up to it once more.

I was understandably surprised. As a result, I didn’t really have it in me to ask what she was doing and simply waited like I was told.

I stared at Ōhinata’s back as she dangled there. Her skirt still had some white dust on it from when she had fallen earlier. It was regrettable that the school-wide cleaning had been so glossed over.

“At any rate, it gets really tiring hanging like this.”

I thought that it looked tiring as well, but I mentioned, “But you’re hanging there of your own volition.”

“Yeah, well, I guess I just felt like doing it,” she said as if she were hiding something.

I asked a question.

“Or maybe someone is hanging you from there.”

“I feel like that also might be that case.”

I thought for a little bit. If she was hanging there because of someone else, I truly felt sorry for her. I had often been in the same situation with my sister, so I understood what it felt like.

“If that’s the case, you should just pull yourself up, yeah?”

Ōhinata turned her head to look at me.

“I don’t have enough strength in my arms to do that. Wait a sec.”

I’m pretty sure it had only been for some tens of seconds. Ōhinata let go and stuck a perfect landing this time. She then turned around with a bright smile.

“It’s probably easier to just let go. Sorry to keep you waiting.”

At that moment, it hit me that something was a little bit strange. On the day of the New Recruit Festival, when Ōhinata came to our table and signed up, I had thought that she was awfully tall for a first-year. Perhaps I had even thought that her constantly smiling, snow-tanned face and ever-excited disposition were somewhat of a hassle.

Yet, at this moment, yesterday after school in the special wing's fourth floor hallway, Ōhinata began to resemble a normal first-year, perhaps even a middle school third-year, she appeared so small.

"Well then, should we get going?"

I felt a false bravado emanate from her happy-go-lucky voice and knew I wasn't far from the truth.

I wondered what Chitanda was doing by her lonesome, but it turned out she was diligently reviewing her textbooks and dictionary in a manner befitting an exceptionally serious student. When she realized we entered, she looked up with a wide grin and closed her books.

"What were you two talking about?"

I wasn't surprised in the least. Not only was the Earth Sciences lecture room door open, but Chitanda had incredible hearing. Even though she wasn't able to suss out the exact details, she was probably at least aware of the fact that we were talking in the first place. I didn't feel like lying to her, so I spoke truthfully.

"We were talking about how Satoshi seemed really busy."

It wasn't the whole truth, but it wasn't a lie either. Chitanda nodded without a trace of doubt.

"Yeah, tomorrow's the Hoshigaya Cup after all."

It might've been my first time hearing someone other than Satoshi call the Marathon Competition the Hoshigaya Cup.

"It's been three days since I've seen you Ōhinata, hasn't it?"

“Oh… is that so?”

Ōhinata responded halfheartedly as her eyes wandered around the room. She then slowly began to approach Chitanda.

“Um, would it be alright if I sat next to you?”

Chitanda appeared to be started, but responded with a kind expression regardless.

“Yeah, feel free.”

I suppose the reason the door was open was to allow for ventilation after all. Several of the windows overlooking the school grounds were pulled open as well, and the bundled up curtains were swaying to a minuscule degree. Because it was already the end of May, the wind that blew inside wasn’t cold.

I set up a chair in the third row from the back and three seats from the window overlooking the school grounds. I sat down and pulled out a paperback from my school-issued shoulder bag.

I heard the sound of a chair being pulled back. Looking up, I saw that Ōhinata had situated herself at the desk directly in front of Chitanda’s. As I found the page that I left off on and started to follow the characters on the page, I became aware of the fact that Chitanda and Ōhinata were talking.

How long had it been, I wonder.

“Yes.”

My concentration broke after hearing that one word.

The book was very interesting, but there were a few boring scenes as well. As I was losing interest during one of these portions, an

unexpected voice suddenly brought me back to reality. I looked up and saw Chitanda facing away from me. It didn't look like she had turned around in my direction at all.

I thought I might've just imagined it. No, I was fairly certain that I heard someone say the word "yes." It had to have been Chitanda. I suddenly realized something else. Ōhinata must've disappeared at some point. Well it wasn't like it was that strange. She probably just left to go home.

At any rate, I tried calling out to Chitanda from behind.

"What's wrong?"

My voice wasn't very loud, but it wasn't so quiet as to not reach her either. However, she didn't budge an inch. At first I thought she might've fallen asleep, but there was no way anyone could've slept with their spine as straight as hers was sitting there. I tried calling out to her again, this time making sure I did so in a louder voice.

"What's wrong?"

Chitanda's body jerked in surprise.

She slowly looked back over her shoulder. She wore an expression I had never seen up until this very moment. There was not a hint of light present in her stiffened eyes. She briefly shook her head like she was frightened of something and then quickly returned to her front-facing position. I thought something might have happened, but thinking that nothing grave could've happened in a classroom with only the two of us and thinking that even had there been a problem, Chitanda would have certainly told me, "I'm curious," I assumed nothing was wrong.

I suddenly realized that the wind outside had become somewhat fierce. It blew all throughout the Earth Sciences lecture room. The sun hadn't set yet, but the temperature was already beginning to drop. I stood up to go close the windows. Chitanda remained sitting upright as she stared into the space in front of her.

I returned to my seat and started reading once more.

I began to fly through the passages, and by the time I raised my head once more, I had finished one more chapter. I doubt much time had passed in that period.

I had intended on finishing it, but it was gradually becoming dark outside. As I put my book back down, thinking that I should leave shortly, the door suddenly opened and Ibara walked inside.

"Hey, did something happen?"

When Chitanda muttered falteringly with a "no," Ibara turned back towards the hallway and then spoke with a somewhat concealed voice.

"I just passed by Hina-chan over there, and she was saying she wasn't going to join."

3. Present: 14.5km; 5.5km Remaining

A few Kamiyama High School students passed me as I hid in the darkness of the enclosed bus stop. While some of them looked as if they had just left the start line on the school grounds, others looked as if they had expended the last of their energy on the vicious uphill and downhill sections as they gasped for air. There were even some that looked like they gave up on the Hoshigaya Cup as they casually lumbered along.

Truthfully, I wanted to be able to look down at the ground and think in peace. If I were to do that, however, I would almost certainly miss Chitanda when she eventually walked by.

I planted myself on the weathered bench and raised my chin as I thought.

I was convinced that the reason Ōhinata had decided to quit was hidden somewhere in the 40 or so days between the New Recruit Festival and yesterday. If I kept that suspicion in the forefront of my mind and retraced my memories then, I could certainly remember various incidents that suddenly started to seem strange. The answer she gave to the question concerning Ibara and Satoshi seemed to back up that possibility.

But what about Chitanda? Judging by her appearance yesterday, she seemed to have an idea as to why Ōhinata had decided to quit. Perhaps she thought that the reason was the result of a gradual accumulation over that 40 or so day period. Or perhaps she thought that the entire reason was due to that small period of time yesterday after school.

If the reason took place somewhere within that 40 or so day span, then that meant this:

Chitanda was convinced that she was the one who drove Ōhinata into a corner. It might have not been inspired by any sort of clear hostility or ill-will, but Chitanda was at least aware of the situation to the point where she had immediately assumed something like, "Because I did what I did to that extent, Ōhinata is going to quit the club." As a fact, she thought she did something to drive Ōhinata away.

If the reason took place sometime within the short amount of time after school yesterday, then that meant this:

While I was absorbed by the thrill of reading about the incredible life of a master spy, Chitanda had made Ōhinata decidedly and undeniably angry. For example, she might have done something like squeezing lemon juice over her chicken karaage without warning nor mercy.[51] Ōhinata became furious, saying something like, "I can't bear being around a person like you any longer!" and then stormed off to quit the club. Essentially, it was something along the lines of an explosion of repressed feelings.

Which was it, I wonder?

Without a doubt, something had been festering inside of Ōhinata for the previous 40 or so days. Only that would explain why Ōhinata had criticized Chitanda in such a roundabout manner saying "she resembled a bodhisattva on the outside."

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[51] Karaage is a method of deep-frying something without coating it with anything other than a small layer of flour.

But in that case, did that mean Chitanda was actually a yakṣa? Had she actually continued to pressure Ōhinata mentally enough to the point where she would quit?

It gradually became clearer and cleared as to what I should have focused on.

Waiting was difficult. I wasn't the Ōhinata of yesterday, but hanging midair was truly exhausting.

This might go without saying, but the worst part was the possibility of accidentally missing Chitanda when I might not be paying attention. If that happened, I would end up remaining at the bus stop, waiting for someone who would never come, continuing to wait, continue waiting even longer in vain, and finally after being found, cold and starving one winter morning, eventually inspiring a theatre production entitled *Waiting for Chitanda*. At any rate, I could no longer even try to predict the distance between the two us.

I played with a certain idea.

If I didn't return to Kamiyama High School from here, the Hoshigaya Cup wouldn't end. However, running was still a pain. Or perhaps more precisely, I was exhausted. On the other hand, I was in a bus stop. Busses were certainly a method of transportation.

In that case I would really prefer it if a bus could come and take me to the high school. It would be fine; I had some loose change in my pocket after all. I had prepared it to use in a vending machine just in case I happened to get really thirsty along the way. What a splendid idea, no? If you aren't good at mental calculation, you should use a calculator. If you aren't good at English, you should use translation

software. If you aren't good at running, you should consider using an alternate form of suitable transportation. I had known this from the very get-go. Might this very thing be considered the manifestation of the strength one requires to go on living? I've truly learned some great things today.

As I was engrossed in these thoughts of mine, Chitanda passed by.

For a moment, I wasn't entirely convinced by what I saw. A part of it had to do with the fact that I still wasn't used to seeing her in the white short-sleeved shirt and crimson short tights that made up the gym uniform ensemble, but her long, tied-up hair also left me with a somewhat different impression than usual. I had seen her hair put up before, for example, when we visited the shrine right after New-Year's Day. She did it to match it with her traditional clothing. Yet this was probably the first time I've seen her tie it up high like this. It was because I was so familiar with her usual demeanor that I almost missed Chitanda as she ran past me, her lips slightly open.

I stood up and broke out into a run. My moment of confusion caused me to react late, so I made an effort to hurry.

The difficult mountain pass was directly up ahead, but I couldn't see any signs of fatigue in Chitanda's running gait. Her arms were pressed to her sides as her waist shook up and down, her feet kicked off the asphalt, and her body seemed perfectly in rhythm with the white lines that pulled the road along as she ran.

The road continued in a straight line between the dense forests and the approaching, freshly-planted fields. It was possible that the road was repaved in recent years as the asphalt was a thick black, looking as if it were brand-new. I had thought there was still some time left before it reached noon, but I squinted as I looked up at the

dazzling sun already sitting high in the sky. As I measured the distance between Chitanda and myself, I continued to run.

I considered suddenly rushing to catch up with her. While it was true that one was unlikely to be paying attention to others while he/she was running, there were also a lot of classmates in front of and behind us. It also felt weird to shadow her like this. I wanted to run as fast as I could while at the same time catching up with her in a natural manner.

Keeping in line with this desire, I slowly closed the gap. I didn't need to be close enough to physically reach out to her, simply close enough for my voice to reach her.

Even then, however, it was still far.

My voice struck in my throat. My legs felt heavy. Even the pain in my leg joints seemed to relapse. My breathing suddenly became more violent.

"This is bad."

The mutter barely left my mouth.

I didn't feel like catching up.

I didn't feel like catching up because I simply didn't want to. The second I did, I would have to hammer her over the head with my reasoning and deductions. As this thought crossed my mind, my legs instantly began to feel explicitly dull. Yeah, that must have been the reason. Even then, I couldn't give up.

Were there 50 meters between us? Or were 100? Perhaps there were even more than that. I remained at a fixed interval behind Chitanda; I could neither shorten nor even extend that distance. I couldn't

afford to continue like this, running as I watched her ponytail sway from left to right.

I clenched my teeth. I decided I would go either now or never.

At around the same time, something unbelievable happened.

Chitanda twisted the upper-half of her body as she ran and looked back.

Our eyes met.

There was no choice but to go. I increased my pace. Although she had turned to look behind her, Chitanda most likely had no idea that I was there. Her eyes widened, and she quickly faced forward once more. No matter how you looked at it, it was dangerous to run while looking behind you. While Chitanda naturally took the Hoshigaya Cup seriously as a part of the school's physical education and didn't slow down as a result, she also didn't make any special effort to shake me off.

If I at least had the resolve to catch up with her, I'd be able to do it. Amidst the end-of-May breeze, I ran alongside Chitanda.

She never once broke her rhythm. I saw her looking at me from out of the corner of her eye, and started talking behind a mask of composure.

"Sorry. I was thinking about calling out to you, but…"

Even though I considered how weird shadowing her would be, it ended up turning out that way anyways. Although she didn't appear to be very interested in my excuses, I could see her tense

features unravel slightly as a hint of doubt crept across her face. Perhaps in an effort to save her breath, she kept her question brief.

"Why're you here?"

She probably realized I was supposed to be far up ahead by this point. I got to the point without a moment's hesitation.

"I want to talk about Ōhinata."

"…"

"To that end, I want to hear your side of the story."

At that moment, Chitanda's breathing became somewhat shallow. Her speed didn't change in the slightest. As the two of us continued to run, some tens of centimeters apart, I waited for her response.

Finally, Chitanda replied with a pained look in her eyes.

"It was my fault."

"What happened yesterday, right?"

"That's between me and Ōhinata."

In the short amount of time it took for her to catch her breath, she continued.

"I'm sorry you went out of your way, but I can't bother you with this."

Although her eyes glistened with moisture, possibly due to being too dry, Chitanda looked straight ahead regardless, not saying any more. I had predicted she would try to pile all of the responsibility onto herself like this, but I now understood that she was even refusing to simply stop and tell me her side of the story.

Even then, I didn't want to give up without first revealing my trump card, so I asked once more.

"I want you to tell me what happened yesterday. Ōhinata might be misunderstanding something."

"I appreciate the thought. I really do. But…"

Chitanda turned her head slightly and showed me a soft smile.

"This isn't anyone else's fault."

Had I not been running, I would have most likely sighed then. She was so utterly convinced that that was the case. Even though there was something I knew and wanted to tell her…

I wanted to grab her shoulder to get her to stand still, but was no way I could've done that. Putting as much strength as I could behind my voice and praying that it would be enough to reach Chitanda, I spoke.

"You're wrong."

I tried to reason with that profile of hers.

"That's not what it was. *Ōhinata wasn't angry at you for peeking at her phone. That wasn't the case at all.*"

For the first time, Chitanda's infallibly rhythmic breathing began to crumble apart.

The course ran alongside the edge of the forest, but it looked less like a forest and more like some sort of grove surrounding the local shrine. The street in front of Mizunashi Shrine led to the riverside as well.

There were no traces of anyone else being in the shrine grounds. I couldn't tell exactly what kind it was, but I could hear the sound of a bird chirping in the distance. There was a water spout, the kind that didn't pour into any sort of basin, so Chitanda stood there collecting the water running from its diagonally cut bamboo nozzle using the shrine ladle and then brought it to her mouth.

"I'm quite skilled at running long distances."

Chitanda continued, her gym clothes impeccably aligned on her body.

"I was thinking I would try to go through the entire course without walking once."

"Sorry."

"The water here is really cold and delicious. You should have some."

Because she moved aside as she said that, I washed my hands and then took some as well. The crisp water looked cold enough to sparkle, so I figured it would hurt my stomach if I drank it all in one go. I took only a little into my mouth and let it slowly trickle down my throat from there.

When looking beyond the shrine's tori, you could see the line of Kamiyama High School students running the course.[52] None of them looked through this tori and up the stone stairs to notice us standing here, however. Chitanda suggested that we enter Mizunashi Shrine because "it wasn't the kind of story you could tell

[52] The large, wooden (and often red) arches that are commonly found lining paths leading into shrines.

while running on the roadside. Certainly enough, this place was very quiet, and it probably made it easier to calmly tell a story.

Chitanda's head drooped slightly, and she stood gripping her left arm with her right hand. Watching me as I slowly drank the water, she asked me a question in a collected voice.

"You saw, right? What I did…"

"No, I didn't. That's why I want you to tell me everything."

"You didn't… see?"

Even as she muttered this, Chitanda didn't urge me to go on. I washed my hands once more beneath the stream of water. The cold sensation felt good.

"I could only see your back. That, and I also heard you say 'Yes.' I could pretty much guess what happened though."

"Did I really say something like that?"

"I guess you did it subconsciously after all."

I showed her a wry smile.

When I parsed through my memories of yesterday, I remembered a single voice saying the word "Yes." I had thought that it was somewhat sudden, but because Chitanda didn't really say anything about it, I assumed it wasn't a big deal and forgot about it accordingly.

However, when that single word brought me back into reality from the book I was reading, Chitanda and I were the only ones in the Earth Science lecture room. Thinking perhaps that Chitanda had

been trying to call for me, I then replied with the typical response, "What's wrong?"

What was that all about, then? Hypothetically, even had I mistook the sound of the wind for her voice, she should have reacted instantly when I called out to her. And yet, the first time I called she didn't even turn around, and the second time I called she only briefly turned in her seat.

I should've realized the meaning behind it then and there. Essentially, Chitanda hadn't directed a single word at me. As for why…

It wasn't like she didn't like me enough to suddenly start talking to me or anything.

"That 'Yes' was the was the sound you make *when you answer a phone.*"

"Is… that so?"

"Was I right about you answering a phone?"

"Yes, I certainly was answering a phone. I don't really remember, however, if I said "Yes" or "Hello" at that time."

It wasn't an impossible story. People don't often say those kinds of formalities consciously. Hypothetically, had I heard her say "Hello?" instead, I would have most likely known she was on the phone.

"Even when I called you, all you did was briefly turn around without saying anything."

"I remember that. But I mean…"

“You couldn’t listen to me because you were on the phone.”

Chitanda nodded.

Of course, Chitanda wasn’t the one who made the call, she simply received it. If that weren’t the case, she probably wouldn’t have only started with a simple “Yes.”

Chitanda didn’t own a cellphone, however. I didn’t know if there was a reason behind it, but she didn’t have one regardless. Whose was it, then?

It may have been left behind by one of the students who had a class in the Earth Sciences lecture room that day. It was possible that it suddenly started to ring after classes had ended.

Upon further consideration, however, that seemed unlikely.

“If that phone was left behind by someone in a place that was difficult to see, I’d expect that the only way you would notice it would be if it made enough noise upon receiving a call or message. Yet, I didn’t hear a single thing.”

Ringing or beeping out loud was one thing, but even someone like me who didn’t have a phone knew that they made a dull “bzzz” sound when they vibrated against a hard surface. If a sound like that had reached my desk, I would have realized it after being pulled away from my book. After all, that’s’ exactly what happened when I heard the small “Yes.”

That meant that there was either no sound, or that the sound was so quiet it couldn’t reach me. Why was that?

“If the phone was Ōhinata’s, everything would make sense.”

“Ōhinata-san’s phone was silent?”

“No way, that’s not it. Try and remember; where was Ōhinata’s cellphone?”

Chitanda quickly responded.

“It was on top of the desk. Ōhinata-san put it there after she sat down.”

Thinking back on it now, something similar happened when we had all the Kagoshima artisan sweets laying around. Ōhinata placed her phone on the desk that time as well. I didn’t her remember doing anything like that when she was in her casual clothes, so maybe it’s solely a sailor uniform custom.

“And then yesterday, you had a textbook and notes on top of your desk. If you put a cellphone on a soft surface like those, the vibrating sound would have been quieter and I wouldn’t have been able to hear it.”

If you were visiting someone else’s house and the phone started to ring, what would you do if there was no one around to answer it. Simply ignoring it and waiting for it to stop ringing was certainly one option. However, the other option was to instead pick up the phone and inform the other party that “no one in the house is currently available.” In actuality, when we went to *Blend* earlier as trial customers, Chitanda ended up arriving late precisely because she had stopped to answer the phone at someone else’s house. When she realized that the cellphone was vibrating yesterday, she probably answered in order to pass on any messages.

It didn’t end happily with her good intentions, however.

“When you answered the phone yesterday, Ōhinata was missing, of course. It’s not like she left to go home, however. She probably just

wandered off to go to the bathroom or something. That's why she quickly returned. And that's when she saw you using her phone."

Chitanda slightly nodded.

Yesterday, after hearing that single "Yes," the strong wind blowing around the classroom had started to make me chilly, so I went to close windows. The reason the wind was circulating so much could probably be attributed to the fact that the Earth Sciences lecture room door *was open*. When Ibara came later, however, I distinctly remembered that she had *opened the door to get in.*

This meant that someone had to have closed that door at some point.

That someone was probably Ōhinata. She had probably only briefly left, returned, and then finally left for her house. She closed the door behind her at that point, saw Ibara, and then told her she was going to quit.

"Ōhinata's cellphone started to vibrate on top of my dictionary."

Chitanda began to speak.

"Ōhinata-san went to go wash her hands so she wasn't around. I thought it might be bad if I went ahead and answered on my own, but what if it happened to be really important… Anyways, I picked it up. I think I pressed a strange button and it suddenly stopped vibrating. I don't really remember myself, but if I did say 'yes,' then I must've thought it connected. However, I couldn't hear any voices coming from the other end.

"Because it wasn't mine and I didn't know how to handle it, I tried placing it in the palm of my hand and seeing if I could manage to hear something. At any rate, I was desperately thinking of how I

could avoid breaking it… I remember you calling out to me. Thinking about it, actually, I should've asked you for help."

If she thought that the call went through, I guess it couldn't have been helped.

"You placed it into the palm of your hand, and after that, the person on the other end didn't say anything."

"That's correct."

I fear Chitanda may have never used a cellphone before.

I've seen Satoshi use his phone numerous times in the past, so even I could hazard a guess as to how to use one. Ōhinata's didn't vibrate because it received a call. It most likely simply received a text. Chitanda probably didn't press any strange buttons either. The phone vibrated for a predetermined number of seconds and then stopped by itself. Or perhaps it really was an incoming call, but the predetermined ringing length had expired, sending the call to voicemail. At any rate, Chitanda had held the cellphone in her palm and no call ended up going through.

Ōhinata had no way of knowing that, however.

"Ōhinata-san returned to the classroom. I had never seen her look at me with those kinds of eyes before, so I couldn't even speak… She grabbed the phone from my hand and said, "Goodbye," in a cold voice that it sounded like she was going to disappear forever, and then she immediately left. I'm stupid, aren't I? It was then when I finally realized how much I messed up."

"It was just a cellphone."

"To me it was just a phone, but…"

Chitanda forced a bitter smile.

“All of us have something we treasure.”

Her voice was almost a whisper.

“Because I don’t have one myself, it was impossible for me to know just how much Ōhinata-san treasured her cellphone. Now I do know. To people who have one, its importance must be akin to something like that of a diary. No, perhaps even more so. If your friend peeked at your diary without telling you, wouldn’t that already be reason enough to cut ties with them? Everyone has secrets, and I thought that I knew that… It only makes sense that Ōhinata-san is angry at me.”

I could see where see was coming from. Certainly enough, things like that happened every now and then.

“What are you going to do now, then?”

“I planned on going to apologize to her once we returned to the school. After all, I couldn’t do even that yesterday.”

From Chitanda’s perspective, this was probably the obvious answer. If she tried her hardest to sincerely apologize, Ōhinata might be able to forgive her. That was if the cellphone was the only problem, however.

What happened yesterday wasn’t everything that had happened between them. Ōhinata most likely got angry when she saw Chitanda touching her phone. It might’ve even been the final straw, but it certainly wasn’t the whole problem. I responded.

“You should probably give up on that. It’s useless.”

“Yeah.”

Chitanda gave a slight nod.

“Oreki-san, you said it wasn’t because of the phone, didn’t you? If that’s true, then it probably will be useless after all. But if that’s the case, then…”

She became quiet and started to think for a little bit.

For someone often slow on the uptake, Chitanda always seemed to be sensitive during times like these. She suddenly lifted her head to look at me and started speaking, her voice dipped in loneliness.

“I’ve probably hurt her without realizing it, haven’t I?”

Things somehow ended up turning out like this.

Yesterday, before entering the clubroom, Ōhinata had been doing something quite peculiar. She had been hanging from a doorframe, looking as if she wanted to do something. In all reality, it probably wasn’t the case that she wanted to do something at all. The Earth Sciences lecture room door had been open, so it was possible to see inside. Knowing that Chitanda was the only one inside, Ōhinata hesitated. Just like when I hesitated while chasing after Chitanda earlier.

When I would be called to the Student Guidance Room, as I would stand in front of the door, not knowing why I was called there in the first place, I would slap my cheeks to find the resolution to walk in. Whenever I received a letter from my sister and assumed that it would just be something unsavory again, I would look up to the heavens and sigh before I cut the seal. These rituals of mine that I used to strengthen my resolve were probably just like her “hanging.”

In other words, Ōhinata headed towards the classroom yesterday with the resolution of one prepared to settle a battle once-and-for-all. She had planned from the start to resolve things with Chitanda. This could also possibly explain why she looked so disappointed when I showed up.

Chitanda brought both her hands in front of her and gazed downwards with melancholic eyes. She then muttered something, almost as if sighing.

"I won't ask you to believe me."

"Believe what?"

"That whatever I did to her wasn't my intent. That, although it appears that I wasn't a good upperclassman to Ōhinata, I didn't wish for that to happen. That I don't know what it was that I did wrong. I won't ask you to believe me when I say these things."

How could she say that this late in the game? I had no idea what spawned it. Sometimes, the things Chitanda said made absolutely no sense whatsoever.

"It's too late for that now."

"Yes, I know."

"If you had truly thought that you did something to wrong her, there's no way that you'd do something like stop in the middle of the marathon. You wouldn't do it purposefully, not on a tiring day like this one."

Chitanda's head came up in surprise. I was the one to turn away this time.

This was, above all, a gamble. Had Chitanda done it on purpose? Did she truly put on a beaming exterior while secretly harming Ōhinata, forcing her to quit the club?

None of the evidence denied it.

Had this been the me of one year ago, I probably would have come to that conclusion. With my subjectivity out of the picture, a lot of information seemed to be pointing to the possibility that Chitanda had indeed pressured Ōhinata. There wasn't anything that could decisively deny that.

But this past year had happened. Even if it wasn't everything about her, hell, even if it was nothing more than the utter smallest of fragments, I had come to know Chitanda. I had heard about the story of her uncle. I had been taken to the movie video preview. I had gone to stay over at the hot-springs inn. I had sold the anthologies at the culture festival. I had had the pointless discussion after school. I had been trapped inside the shed. I had held an umbrella up for a doll.

That's why I denied it.

Even though Chitanda might've seemed different from other people because of the extraordinary tranquility surrounding her, I didn't feel like she would have chased away a new recruit.

It was a gamble born from an extremely irrational premise full of "I didn't feel likes," and what I ended betting on looked something like this: "Ōhinata felt pressured by Chitanda in the 40 or so days that she had spent with us, but not only did Chitanda not intend for that to be the case, she couldn't even think of anything aside from a simple misunderstanding that might have caused Ōhinata to become angry with her." And somehow, it looked like I won.

Mizunashi Shrine lay surrounded by giant cedars. The birds around us cried ceaselessly. I glanced at Chitanda out of the corner of my eye, and as she stood there bathed in the spotted sunlight filtered by the branches above, I thought she looked somewhat like a lost child who had finally been found.

"Oreki-san, I…"

Unfortunately, however, I had no time to spare. Chitanda's group was the last of the second-years to start. I needed know everything before Ōhinata caught up.

"So what kinds of things did you talk about yesterday?"

Chitanda looked like she wanted to say something, but she eventually responded with a resolute nod.

"I understand. I'll tell you everything that happened."

Immediately after she said that, however, I heard her mutter something else under her breath.

"But no matter how I look at it, it was your normal, everyday after-school conversation…"

4. Present: 14.6km; 5.4km Remaining

Yesterday, I was reviewing my English class materials.

I could tell someone was in the hallway. Because it was so quiet yesterday, I could clearly hear the sound of footsteps. I couldn't tell exactly who it was, however, until I saw you enter the class yourself. I also realized then that the person you were talking to was Ōhinata.

I could really feel that there was some kind of wall between Ōhinata and me. It was like she was always being far too polite when she said hi. That's why I was really happy when she started talking to me of her own volition yesterday.

At first, we started talking about the textbook sitting on top of my desk. Things like about how she wasn't very good at English, about how math would probably be more useful anyways, and about what subjects I myself was good at. I had thought it was a very typical kind of chat.

After that, we moved on to the weather. Because the Hoshigaya Cup was going on the next day, Ōhinata was telling me how she was hoping it would rain. Because I had assumed she was the athletic type, I believe I told her that I found her saying that to be unexpected. She laughed and then told me, "Running cross-country because I like it and running in school are two entirely different things."

It felt like this entire conversation was predetermined, however. Thinking back on it now, Ōhinata might have decided on exactly what she was going to say ahead of time. She suddenly cut herself off and looked like she wanted to say something else. I didn't

encourage her to say it or anything, but I don't think I did anything to prevent her from telling me either. But she ended up taking a small breath, and said this in her usual cheery voice.

"Ibara-senpai isn't here today, huh."

I didn't know whether Mayaka-san would be coming or not, so I just went along with that.

"I suppose so. Perhaps she went to the Manga Research Society?"

As soon as I said this however, I realized I made a mistake and went to correct it.

"Oh that's right, she quit already."

I remembered that as soon as I said this, Ōhinata started to lean in out of curiosity.

"What? Ibara-senpai was in the Manga Society?"

"That's right. She's really good at drawing. I think she had some friends in the club, but it's probably for the best that she quit."

As I said this, Ōhinata seemed to become a little tense.

"Ibara-senpai joined the Manga Society because she liked manga, right? If she had some friends there as well, why would her quitting be 'for the best'?"

I was somewhat at a loss for words. After all, I knew that Mayaka-san had experienced many painful things while being in that club. Mayaka-san would have likely never told Ōhinata-san anything about these painful experiences herself, so I wondered if it was okay for me to talk about any of it without asking her first.

That's why I spoke about it very broadly, making sure as to not give any specifics.

"Let's see. I do think that Mayaka-san still has some affection for the club, but… it seems that there were a lot of people in the Manga Society who had views differing from Mayaka-san's. I'm sure there were still ways for everyone to agree on certain things, of course. Last year, I believe she put up with quite a bit.

"However, trying to reach an agreement while everyone continues to hold onto their differing opinions can be quite difficult. While she might have some regrets, I do think that she made the correct decision in the end."

Ōhinata-san listened to me as I said this with uncharacteristic attention. It looked as if she were peeking into my eyes, and then as she politely lowered her head in front of me as I sat there troubled, she said this.

"Even then, you shouldn't just abandon them, right?"

"Abandon" was such a harsh word to have chosen.

I'm sure you were also aware of this, Oreki-san, but Mayaka-san actively alienated herself from the dominating faction in the Manga Society. When talking solely about her supporters in the club, however, I suppose one could make the point that she abandoned those in the minority that looked up to her by quitting. Thinking that was Ōhinata-san's point, I responded.

"It might've been painful, but Mayaka-san needed to look out for herself as well. Even though she was hurt in all the conflict, no one in the Manga Society came to her aid.

“Truthfully, there was no reason Mayaka-san had to introduce conflict into the Manga Society. It probably would have been best if she had simply remained aloof, appearing to only be concerned about the manga aspect. It’s already far too late for that however, and Mayaka-san isn’t the kind of person to do that anyways.

“…If she was going to eventually quit at some point, wouldn’t you agree that it was a good idea to do so at the start of a new academic year?”

Ōhinata-san was lost in thought. It made me feel a little happy that she was thinking of Mayaka-san to that extent.

After a little while, Ōhinata-san showed me a smile that even I knew was fake and got up from her seat, saying “I guess she didn’t choose a bad time, did she?”

She then added, “Excuse me for a second,” and proceeded to leave the classroom.

Oreki-san, I don’t get any of it! I didn’t really say anything that strange yesterday after school!

5. Present: 14.6km; 5.4km Remaining

I understood what Chitanda was saying. Certainly enough, had you heard only that, all her story would amount to would be "Chitanda was worried about Ibara and supported her decision." The story being strange or not aside, none of it even concerned Ōhinata from the start.

However, I had also heard several other stories as well. I started to understand the true nature of the invisible wall that Ōhinata had holed herself up behind. Knowing this information while listening to Chitanda's story, I felt like I understood somewhat just what it was that welled up from within Ōhinata.

Ōhinata thought that Chitanda was a terrifying upperclassman. Chitanda thought that she had pushed Ōhinata to the point of quitting. Before today's Hoshigaya Cup had even started, I had realized something was off.

Satoshi had said it from the very start. He found it surprising that I had been able to recruit a new student into the club. I felt indifferently about the entire thing. It's not like we really did anything in the club after all. Whether Ōhinata joined or left, none of it mattered to me.

However, I didn't want there to be any unresolved misunderstandings left behind. If I was the one being misunderstood, I probably wouldn't have minded, but that wasn't the case.

"Is there anything else I can do?"

There shouldn't have been anything else that I absolutely needed to know. There was still something, however, that I had decided I would ask Chitanda before the race had even started.

When I retraced through my memories before arriving at Mizunashi Shrine, I realized that there was one more thing I could only confirm with Chitanda. I thought it would've been strange to ask about it when it was brought up initially, but now I understood why.

"There is. I want to ask you one more question."

"Go ahead."

"It concerns the day when all of us went to the coffee shop owned by Ōhinata's relative. Before we left, Ōhinata asked you a single question. It was about whether or not you knew a certain first-year."

As I expected, Chitanda instantly remembered.

"Yes, it was Agawa-san."

"Who is she?"

That day, if I remember correctly, Chitanda was instantly able to answer when asked by Ōhinata if she knew her. I naturally assumed that she had some relationship with Chitanda.

"Well… I don't really know anything about her."

"Really?"

"All I know is that she's a first-year in Class A."

"Even though you don't know her, you know which class she's in?"

“Even you should know, Oreki-san.”

I should?

Chitanda had an incredible knack for remembering faces and names. After all, last year, she was able to remember my name after simply meeting me once in a music class that we were only briefly in together. That’s why I didn’t find it strange that she might have seen Sachi Agawa’s name somewhere. But I wasn’t capable of doing that myself.

There shouldn’t have been many opportunities for us to learn the name of an underclassman. I looked downwards as I thought.

First-year. Class A. Sachi Agawa.

“Someone I should know… Agawa… Agawa…”

“Come on.”

Chitanda suddenly spoke up. She probably didn’t say it like that in order to tease me. At the same time, however, it suddenly dawned on me.

Agawa from Class A.

It was likely that out of all of the girls' seating numbers, she sat at the most obvious one. This was representative of one having the best grades before entering the school.

“Was she the student representative during the entrance ceremony?”

“That’s correct.”

Chitanda nodded.

“The number one boy from Class A, Naoya Aikura-san, and the number one girl from the same class, Sachi Agawa-san, were the ones who said the pledge during the ceremony. Of course, I thought the question was abrupt and somewhat strange, but I just assumed she was just trying to test my recollection.”

That wasn’t it. There was no way that was a simple test.

“Do you know anything else about her?”

“She had extremely long hair. Because I could only see her from behind, that was all I knew.”

Ōhinata probably wasn’t aware of this, however.

With that, I had asked everything I had wanted to ask. All that was left was to talk to Ōhinata.

I couldn’t say I wasn’t anxious. It was enough to make me want to follow Ōhinata’s example and try hanging from some doorframe somewhere.

“Okay, that’s plenty. I should be able to take care of the rest, so you should return to the course.”

As I said this, I raised my head.

Chitanda’s eyes lay massive right before mine.

As I recoiled back, she said this to me.

“I’m sorry, Oreki-san. I’ll leave the rest to you. Ōhinata probably won’t listen to anything I have to say anymore. But…

“If Ōhinata-san is truly suffering because of something, won’t you please help her? It there was some sort of unfortunate

misunderstanding, won't you please unravel it? I won't ask you to bring her back to the Classics Club, but could you do at least this?"

That was my intent. That was my intent from the very start. I nodded that I understood, and Chitanda lowered her head slightly, turning back and dashing to the road once more.

Chapter 5 - Approximating the Distance between Two People

1. Present: 17.0km; 3.0km Remaining

I ran without thinking for some time after.

Chitanda had started a couple minutes before I did, so I wasn't likely to catch up with her. All that was left for me to do was to wait for Ōhinata. I could've achieved this by simply standing still and waiting for her, but I ran regardless. Some of the pain in my knee still remained, but be it through the small river path that was constantly hounded by the May wind, be it on the cedar-lined road that chilled my skin with the moisture in the air, be it over the exhaust-filled sidewalk that followed the bypass, I ran regardless.

A traffic signal appeared in front of me, and the green pedestrian walk light began to blink. In front of the signal stood a General Committee member with a face looking like a first-year's appearing poised to potentially stop my rhythm. I slipped past the side and flew across the crosswalk in one go. At that moment, I realized I had finally entered the city's center once more. Residential cars and trucks came up and down the bypass, and looking up, I could see several rows of featureless apartment buildings.

Running was scary. The inside of my mind went blank. It felt like all of the events I had remembered as well as all of the ideas I had formulated were all beginning to melt and drip down from my brain. I could understand the happiness behind achieving that pure, detached mental state, but I absolutely had to remember everything at this point. And yet, I continued to run. Wasn't it possible that I had indeed forgotten something along the way, like water spilling

recklessly from a cup? I knew I had to calm down, but I couldn't stop running. Just like you'd see in an actual long-distance race, my breathing was short and my arms swung bit-by-bit.

It was strange. Last year, I had experienced so many one-on-one encounters. During summer break when we watched the upperclassmen's video movie project, it was with Irisu-senpai. In the parking lot during the culture festival, I had a face-to-face conversation with only two of us. There were probably so many others as well, but because my breathing was so rapid, I couldn't remember any of it.

I had a certain thought, however. No matter the extent to which I had confronted them at those moments, none of it weighed as heavily on my heart as it did now.

Possibly in order to steer clear of any intersections, the course that previously stretched straight alongside the bypass as it skirted the suburbs turned onto a thin street passing through a residential area. Because it was in a particularly old corner of Kamiyama City, rust and amber-colored sheet iron roofs stood out on all sides. I slipped by postboxes with their cinnabar paint peeling off and by telephone poles with fading, yellow reflectors and approached a bridge built over a small channel only several meters wide.

This place would probably be good. There was water nearby, it was cool and refreshing out, and there was a small area at the foot of the bridge I could stand on without getting in anyone's way. I steeled my nerves and stopped running. I squatted down with an "Oh, my laces came undone!" and put on a show like I was retying my dirtied shoes, but it only made me feel like a smart-ass.

I could hear the slight murmuring of the water in the channel. Students clothed in white and crimson passed me on my side.

It was difficult to smile after running a ten or so kilometer track.

There was an exhausted boy moving even more slowly than a normal walk, but he continued to move his arms up and down as he maintained a running posture. There were two girls walking side-by side, their heads handing down, perhaps bound by some promise like “Let’s run all the way to the end together!” There was another student trudging along, face contorted in agony, likely in some sort of pain. I couldn’t see a single smile among any of their faces.

I figured that, by this point, essentially all of the second-years had already gone ahead. Everyone I could see now was a first-year. Judging by their faces as they ran without knowing how much longer they needed to run, they were a miserable bunch. It made me want to reassure them that if they continued running earnestly, they would reach the end in no time. If I did, I guess I would also turn into everyone’s beloved “senpai,” whether I wanted to become one or not.

Once I retied the laces on my right shoe, I started retying the laces on my left one. Once I retied the laces on my left shoe, I started retying the laces on my right one. This was how I earned myself time crouching there.

I saw off dozens of tired faces, and wondered how long I had been waiting there.

Then Ōhinata appeared.

Just like I had assumed would be the case, she wasn't with anyone else. With her arms hugging her flanks and her mouth slightly open, she ran at a fairly quick pace, entirely alone.

I slowly stood up and waved to her. She noticed me immediately.

I had initially thought that she might decide to ignore me. If that was the case, then it couldn't be helped, and I was prepared to give up on the entire thing altogether.

However, Ōhinata looked at me wide-eyed and began to drop her speed, eventually coming to a halt right in front of me. She calmed her slightly labored breathing, and then suddenly brought her face up to look at mine.

"You're in quite the strange location, aren't you senpai?"

It was difficult to smile after running a ten or so kilometer track.

And yet, Ōhinata showed me a beaming grin, just like she had done during the New Recruit Festival.

"What's wrong Tomoko, who's that?!"

Someone suddenly called out to Ōhinata in a teasing manner. Ōhinata responded to the figure.

"It's just an upperclassman from my club!"

After finally being convinced by Ōhinata that it was nothing, the student started to run off once again. She was probably a classmate.

"She's only shrewd when it concerns things that are none of her business."

After jokingly complaining, Ōhinata started to squint at me.

“But seriously, senpai, what are you doing here? You were supposed to have started way ahead of me if I remember correctly.”

“Yeah, well…”

“Wait!”

She suddenly stopped me with a sharp command and then brought a hand to her chin.

“Let me try to guess. General Committee members normally stand in places like that. But you aren’t a member, Oreki-senpai. Fukube-senpai, however, is a member, and the two of you are friends. I understand it now.”

She raised her head and asked me, “What do you think’s my guess?”

Was she perhaps unaware that she had already said it out loud?

“You think that Satoshi’s relying on me by having me serve as a replacement General Committee member.”

“Bingo!”

Her face instantly lit up. Unlike yesterday after school, it was a natural smile. Perhaps it was runner’s high? Or maybe she felt relieved of a large burden after deciding to quit the club.

“Well? Was I right?”

I pointed at my shoes.

“My shoes have dirt on them. If I was acting as a General Committee member, I would’ve been dropped off here, so my shoes

wouldn't have gotten this dirty. They're like this because I had to run."

Ōhinata looked at my sneakers and pouted seemingly in disappointment.

"But only a normal person would have been able to run enough to get them that dirty. How did you manage it, Oreki-senpai?"

"I'm telling you I ran here myself. What more do you want me to say?"

"Well, why are you here then?"

"I wanted to say something, so I waited here."

"To whom?"

After asking this, she suddenly pointed a finger at herself with a shocked expression.

"What? To me?! Yikes…"

I guess she wasn't really averse to being ambushed like this. If anything, she seemed amazed.

"I'm sorry you took time out of your day for this."

She briefly lowered her head in apology and then continued speaking while playing with her short hair.

"To be honest, I did expect that someone would come and say something to me, but I didn't think it would be you during the Marathon Tournament, Oreki-senpai."

She then stared fixedly at me and smiled.

“But I’m sorry. I’ve already made up my mind. It was a really fun club, so I’m sure someone else will join quickly enough.”

There was no way that would happen.

At the same time, I hadn’t really intended on trying to stop her from leaving either.

“That’s not what I wanted to talk with you about.”

I took a small breath.

“There’s something I want to tell you.”

“Um, I’d be in a bind if you asked me out here.”

I brushed the joke aside and hit her over the head with the single sentence I had spent my time carefully refining.

“Chitanda doesn’t know a single thing about your friend.”

“What…”

“She doesn’t know a single thing.”

Ōhinata’s expression quietly vanished from her sun-tanned face.

Chitanda didn’t know a single thing. At the same time, however, that was exactly how much I knew as well, and Ōhinata quickly realized this herself.

How long did the silence continue, I wonder. A runner enjoying his spare stamina ran by directly next to us, causing wind to form in his wake. As if riding this breeze, Ōhinata started to speak.

“If Chitanda-senpai didn’t know anything, then who told you?”

“No one did.”

“I don’t want to have a long conversation here.”

I felt the same way. We’d stand out far too much if we talked while standing directly next to the course. I had prepared for this ahead of time. I gestured with my eyes over to an alleyway lined with wooden fences in-between two old houses.

“It should be fine if we take a different road.”

“Uh…”

She was at a loss for words.

“Is that even allowed? This is the Marathon Event, right?”

“It’s the Hoshigaya Cup. Of course if you want to keep everything on record, I won’t say it’s impossible.”

Ōhinata looked at the alleyway and then at the students dutifully crossing the bridge as they progressed through the course, and she started to think. I didn’t have to wait very long for her answer.

“Alright, let’s do it. I’m a bit nervous though...”

It would be bad if we were seen blatantly leaving the course. Ōhinata and I waited for a lull in the passing line of Kamiyama High School students and then nonchalantly slipped into the alleyway.

2. Present: 18.6km; 1.4km Remaining

"This road leads back to Kamiyama High School, right?"

Considering she was being taken along an unfamiliar road, it was no wonder she felt uneasy.

"It connects back up to the course in front of Arekusa Shrine. It's quite the shortcut, you know."

"A shortcut, huh…"

Apparently still hung up on our leaving the course, I could hear her grumbling.

"You pretty much do whatever you want, don't you Oreki-senpai."

I wouldn't say that was true. If I absolutely had to, even I would properly run the entire length of the course. I just couldn't think of any others alternatives, so it couldn't be helped that I had to resort to this.

The two of us walked. There was no longer a need for us to run.

Lined up.

"Hey, a cat," muttered Ōhinata. I looked, and certainly enough, I saw a cat sitting atop the wooden fence. It was striped like a tiger.

"Senpai, you don't like animals, do you?"

"I haven't considered whether or not I do. Why'd you assume that?"

"Because animals are a pain in the ass. Don't you dislike things that are a pain in the ass, senpai?"

She was dead-on. At the same time however, I've never really considered myself to be someone that disliked animals. I never really went out of my way to like them either, however.

"Aren't you assuming a little too much?"

"Probably…"

Her voice became slightly quieter.

"That's just like me. I always assume too much."

"Give me an example."

"I'm assuming that you're covering for Chitanda-senpai by lying to me about her not knowing anything. If she didn't know anyone, then how could you have known about it?"

During this Hoshigaya Cup, I had done a lot of thinking about Ōhinata. …

"That's not it. If you think about it, you can learn a surprisingly large number of things."

"Really?"

I assured her that was the case, and she sighed.

"From the very start, it's not like I even said Chitanda-senpai was the reason I was quitting."

"You didn't say it outright, but you told Ibara 'Chitanda looked like a bodhisattva,' right?"

"Isn't that compliment?"

If that was truly the case, then why was her head hanging so low as she said it.

“‘If someone looks like a bodhisattva on the outside, then they must be a yakṣa on the inside,’ right?”

Ōhinata weakly looked up at me with a bitter smile.

“I went through the trouble of pretending I didn’t know about it, so couldn’t you just follow suit?”

“Second-years know a whole bunch. If you didn’t want us to know, you should’ve tried something harder.”

“Like Russian?”

“Like Russian.”

A small pebble rolled in front of us. Ōhinata kicked it down the street and let out a shallow sigh.

“I guess you found me out. If Chitanda-senpai really didn’t tell you anything, then how about you tell me, senpai? How was I wrong?”

“This isn’t about being wrong.”

“It was just a figure of speech.”

I had arrived at my conclusion based on what I remembered from Ōhinata’s behavior; I hadn’t heard anything from Chitanda. As long as I didn’t explain this process to her, she probably wouldn’t listen to what I had to say. There was probably no working about it, but it was difficult to arrange everything in order.

“I wonder where I should start.”

“Why not from when we first met?”

Of course that seemed to be the easiest solution, but…

“That would make it really long. I feel like it should be possible to condense it a little.”

“It’s fine if it’s long, isn’t it? After all, we…”

She paused as if to think about her choice of words, and then continued with a conflicted smile full of self-mockery.

“After all, we accidentally veered from the proper path.”

To think she could say such disreputable things about us. I even told her we would join up with the main group later...

I suppose it was true, however, that we broke off from the school event. There wasn’t a single trace of anyone in the alleyway around us under the midday sun. Even the cat that was there earlier seemed to have disappeared amidst the silence. Only the sound of our footsteps and voices resounded off the wooden fences.

“Well then, for now I guess I’ll start at the very beginning, on the day of the New Recruit Festival.”

As I said this, Ōhinata stared hard into the side of my face. I continued, slightly put off.

“On the day of the New Recruit Festival, you overheard Chitanda and I having an unimportant conversation. Even thinking back on it now, you must have ended up stopping in a really inconspicuous place.”

“It wasn’t unimportant at all. You may have potentially saved somebody’s life then.”

Now that she mentioned it, I suppose that really was a serious case of food poisoning. I hadn’t considered up to this point that was took

place at our table ended up being that significant of a conversation. At the moment, however, I didn't care to think about it.

"The biggest hint from that conversation was actually something you said."

"Really? Me?"

She pointed at herself.

"What did I say again?"

"I don't remember your exact choice of words, but it was something along the lines of 'shady people don't wear nametags.' It was because you said that that we were able to figure out what it was that the Confectionery Society was missing."

A somewhat happy look appeared in Ōhinata's eyes.

"Now that you mention it, I guess I did say something like that."

It certainly felt like it happened ages ago considering not even two months had passed since then. A recollection that had previously been trapped in my memories somehow escaped and reminded me of the smiles that Chitanda and Ōhinata had exchanged that day, completely uninhibited by worry.

"What captured my interest even more than that, however, was what you said right before it. I think it was something like this."

I took a single breath.

"'This is just something a friend told me, but...'"

"...You have quite the memory."

“After all, the second I heard it, I thought that it was probably you just expressing your own opinions.”

During the Hoshigaya Cup, I had asked Satoshi to try something for me. What would he think if I told him, “This is just something a friend told me, but no matter how you think about it, it’s pretty unfair that the General Committee doesn’t have to run.” Satoshi responded with, “So that’s what you really think, huh? I’d think something like that would make me pretty upset.” I thought it was a fairly representative answer.

“When people have something difficult to say to someone else, they often use phrases like ‘I heard this from someone,’ ‘there’s this rumor,’ or ‘I overheard this just now’ and make up some imaginary third-party to soften the blow. This wasn’t something that I said, and I don’t believe it at all, but apparently it exists somewhere in the realm of thought... I suppose it feels like a way of talking to someone using their back gate.”

“Using their back gate... what a roundabout way of saying that.”

Ōhinata smiled bitterly.

“Just say what you’re thinking and call it cowardly.”

“I’m not so brazen that I could criticize somebody like that.”

The alleyway continued to stretch on. I thought I saw something move out of the corner of my eye, but it simply turned out to be laundry hanging on a drying pole over someone’s veranda as it swayed in the wind.

Had Ōhinata been using a method like this when talking with us? That’s what I had originally thought, however...

“In your case, that back gate comparison didn’t apply.”

There was no response.

“‘This is just something a friend told me.’ *This ‘friend’ isn’t an imaginary third-party, but rather actually exists in reality.* I can’t be certain that every phrase you evoked your friend for was something that they actually said, but some of them undeniably came from that very real ‘friend’ of yours.”

Without either affirming or denying this, Ōhinata continued to stare at me with an incredibly calm expression.

“Why do you think this?”

“Your actions and your ‘friend’s’ actions contradicted each other. Things happened that wouldn’t have had you been simply using this ‘friend’ as a pretense for expression your own opinions.”

“No way... nothing like that happened.”

She complained listlessly as she stared at her feet.

“It was on the very last Sunday in April, from 2 PM onwards.”

“I don’t remember anything about that, but considering you can talk about it so specifically, I’m assuming it was on your birthday, senpai?”

“That’s correct. Let me just thank you again for celebrating it with me in the first place.”

“I’m very happy to hear that you enjoyed it.”

Even as we exchanged these pleasantries, the uncomfortable tension between us as we carefully watched each other showed no signs of

letting up. It wasn't like it was incredibly tense, but I figured I'd proceed with caution anyways.

"That day, if I remember correctly, I brought up the idea of getting some pizza. It'd be perfect for the five of us to snack on, but in the end, we didn't order any. Do you remember why?"

"I do."

She raised her head and responded immediately.

"It was because Ibara-senpai doesn't like cheese."

I nodded.

"That's right. ...By the way, did you know that even though Ibara talked about it like she didn't like any cheese at all, she's apparently perfectly fine with cheesecake?"

"Oh yeah?"

I cracked a small grin.

"I've eaten it with her once before."

She didn't respond to this little observation of mine. Ibara and I might've not been on the best of terms, but we had known each other for over ten years. I had seen her many times, and in one of those scenes she happened to be eating cheesecake.

"Do you remember what you said at that moment?"

After I asked that, she nodded slightly.

"I believe I said 'You don't like cheese either?' or something like that. 'One should throw away rotten mandarin oranges and spoiled milk.'"

Sure it was a normal food to dislike when divvying your likes and dislikes, but it seemed like an awfully excessive way to word it. That wasn't all, however.

"You forgot the 'This is just something a friend told me, but...' in front of it."

"Is that so."

I was sure she remembered, but she played dumb regardless.

"You have quite the memory. You get unexpectedly hung up on the small stuff, don't you senpai?"

"Even you remembered something like Ibara not liking cheese. So even I try to make it a point to remember what people can't eat. It'd be bad if I ended up recommending something bad to them even after hearing it after all."

"...Is that really how it goes?"

She scratched her check and showed me an embarrassed smile.

For a bit, the alleyway seemed to curve around an old house with sheet iron walls. A lot of water appeared to be dripping onto one of the walls from a raised gutter, and the sound it made felt refreshing to my ears.

"After that I assumed that you couldn't eat cheese. After all, I thought that the 'This is just something a friend told me' simply prefaced your own words and opinions. That's why I thought something seemed off when we went to the coffee shop."

After reaching this point, Ōhinata seemed to be able to piece the rest together on her own.

“I see, so that’s what it was. I’m an idiot as well.”

“I thought for sure that you’d order the plain cream. Imagine my surprise when you didn’t.”

At the coffee shop started up by Ōhinata’s cousin, the only thing we could eat there were scones as well as the jam and cream to spread on top. There were two types of jam, and as for the cream, he offered us plain cream and mascarpone.

I didn’t remember most of the specifics, but the two things I did remember were that all of us had ordered a different combination of jam and cream to the shop owner’s dismay and that the same Ōhinata who had said “One should throw away rotten mandarin oranges and spoiled milk” had chosen a cheese-flavored cream.

“I realized it at that moment, although I suppose I would’ve realized it far sooner had I accepted what you always said at face value.”

Ōhinata had told us “This is just something a friend told me” from the very start. I should’ve simply accepted that for what it was rather than trying to add all sorts of complicated, unnecessary layers to it.

“You have a ‘friend’, and unlike you, this person dislikes cheese.”

Ōhinata bit her lip and didn’t reply.

She didn’t even retort with the obvious response, “Of course I have friends, what of it?”

That silence of hers spoke plenty. Ōhinata had a certain friend she didn’t want anyone to know about.

The back alleyway became somewhat convoluted and it contained some small crevices along the way that only a single person could squeeze through at a time. To my surprise, I saw a nameplate attached to a wall containing the name of this particular neighborhood. That meant that even this narrow road was an actual street in the city registry. As I silently applauded myself for getting this far, Ōhinata spoke up from behind.

"Is this even an real street? Kinda suspicious if you ask me."

Although she said this in a joking manner, her voice contained none of its usual playful lightheartedness.

"What are you planning on doing if I'm lying?"

"What are *you* planning on doing?"

"Well I'm not lying, so I have no idea."

There was no way to continue this kind of constricted small talk. We passed through the back alleyway, carefully stepped over a flowerpot sitting in the middle of the path, and finally stepped out into a slightly larger street. I finally took a deep breath.

It was halfway up a gentle slope. Ōhinata looked left and right and muttered a question.

"Where are we?"

I had no idea how to explain it in relation to other points in the area, so I decided to just cover up that fact.

"You'll find out soon enough."

As we started to descend the hill, Ōhinata walked alongside me.

There was no doubt that in our previous conversation, Ōhinata indicated that she indeed had a friend and had also been parroting this friend in her talks with us. There were other things I knew about that friend, however.

"By the way, that 'friend' is also from middle school I assume. That's quite a special relationship. There's also the possibility of that person being from your prep school or something else, but that aside, they must have transferred here in their third year, and after, didn't enter Kamiyama High School with you."

As I suddenly brought this up, Ōhinata fiercely raised her eyebrows. It was clearly a look of suspicion. There was no reason for me to repeat what I had just said.

"Chitanda didn't tell me this."

"But there's no way you could know that much..."

"You said yourself that you didn't have any friends in high school. When you, Satoshi, and I walked home after school that one day, I'm pretty sure you said just that. If you didn't have any in high school, then it's clear that that 'friend' of yours must have been from your middle school days, right?"

When Satoshi and I went to walk home that one rainy day, we ended up seeing Ōhinata right as we left the gate. Because she told us, "I haven't really made any friends yet," the three of us ended up walking together. I distinctly remember thinking on the inside, "Is that so? You really seem like the social type though..."

"That was..."

Even though she spoke up, she quickly became quiet again.

“You didn’t mean, however, that you didn’t have anyone you could speak intimately with. It seems like you’re on good terms with a bunch of people in your class, and yet, you don’t refer to them as friends.”

I waited a little bit for her to respond. She stayed silent.

If she continued to clam up even as I baited her like this, however, she would probably need energy equal to something like the equivalent in order to speak up once more. In reality, it looked like she had become quite depressed just from me talking like this.

I was going to tread on her feelings and thoughts and analyze this girl that I had so naturally talked to yesterday as her upperclassman. Essentially, I was going to be telling her "This is who you are." I ended up stopping as the gravity of my actions towards her flooded into the front of my mind. I had to continue.

“Because I’m going to be talking about yesterday now, I’m sure the both of us will be able to remember it perfectly. We had a little talk in the hallway before entering the clubroom. The talk itself was meaningful of course, but I was also intrigued when you mentioned being in the same class as Satoshi’s little sister.”

Ōhinata had known about what had happened between Satoshi and Ibara, and while not knowing the exact details, she also knew about him owing her. She had apparently heard all of this from Satoshi’s little sister.

“I think that Satoshi’s little sister is a considerably strange person, but apparently you don’t feel the same way. By the way, someone who talks about all of her sibling’s romantic entanglements to someone she isn’t very close to is strange no matter how you might try and frame it.

“If you did hear about Satoshi’s entanglements from that girl, then you had to at least have had a friendship with her strong enough for her to be able to tell you those kinds of things. Additionally, you said you also ate lunch with her, right? And yet, you wouldn’t even refer to someone like Satoshi’s little sister as a friend. I essentially realized it because you kept on simply calling her your ‘classmate’.”

A truck was coming up the hill towards us. The road was getting wider, but I stepped in front of Ōhinata to form a single file just in case. The sun was right in front of us. I had used this pass every now and then, but I didn’t realize the hill faced the south.

Smelling the exhaust as it passed me, I lined up with Ōhinata once more. I then continued on like nothing had happened.

“Thanks to a certain strange meeting, I’ve been constantly dragged into hassle after hassle over the past year. I got to thinking in all of that and it made me realize something. The situation always required me to solve everything. At that moment, Satoshi had said I had the ‘detective’s role’, but I didn’t like the sound of that at all. It made me kind of embarrassed, and I didn’t want to be referred to in that manner.

“That act of not wanting to call it that purely due to a selfish desire that held no regard for its validity... isn’t that what you’re doing right now? You don’t want to use the word ‘friend’ like it was cheap. Since not even two months had passed since you entered high school, even though you had intimate conversations with her and sat by her side as you both ate lunch, you still couldn’t find it in you to use that word to describe Satoshi’s little sister. Isn’t that the case?”

I should've realized how preciously Ōhinata regarded that word a lot time ago. She even said it clearly herself when talking about what it was she treasured the most on that rainy day. Again, things turned out so convoluted and roundabout because I hadn't taken her words at face value.

Ōhinata opened her mouth. A slight "I..." leaked out.

But in the end, she didn't continue.

She restrained herself almost as if sighing. The problem wasn't over yet.

"In this case, what kind of person is the one you call your 'friend' then? The only thing that's certain is that that person doesn't go to Kamiyama High School.

"Well, that kind of thing couldn't be avoided. When I graduated from middle school, I ended up having to leave a bunch of people who I was on good terms with as well. Satoshi was about the only person that came with me."

Although I said it like that, I couldn't actually think of any names aside from Satoshi's. What a heartless reality.

Was it a case of them being seldom seen and soon forgotten? Or was I truly a little coldhearted after all?

I suddenly began to smell the scent of miso soup drift in from somewhere. I saw a small puddle of water on the ground where some residents must have been washing something off. Most of it had already dried up under the shining spring sun. I hadn't fully realized how dead the streets would be before noon. Even though I

had assumed we see the occasional neighborhood resident and had even prepared a way to talk ourselves out of their certain questioning, we didn't meet a single person. I thought it a little strange that we constantly saw these traces of human activity but never saw the people themselves. At any rate, had this not been the case, we wouldn't have had the chance to walk around the town like this on a school day.

"All Chitanda told me was what you two talked about in the clubroom after school yesterday."

As if half talking to myself, I continued.

"It was about Ibara, huh. About how she quit the Manga Society. Chitanda agreed with her decision to leave it. She probably even gave her a push. I don't really know both sides of the issue, so I can't say if I personally agree or disagree. What I do know, however, is that Ibara really calmed down after that. It may have been for the best simply on account of that alone.

"By the way, yesterday after school you clearly looked like you were preparing yourself to try and settle something. In order to clear up something and stop your feeling of perpetual suspension, you decided you were going to confirm something with Chitanda. Was it about what happened with Ibara? Did you argue with Chitanda over her decision to support Ibara because you didn't want her to leave the Manga Society?"

Of course it wasn't. Ōhinata herself quickly replied.

"It wasn't."

"If that was the kind of conversation that you couldn't have without readying yourself, I would have a hard time believing that you

could simply bring it up on the fly and in a single go. I figured you were just changing the subject or perhaps hiding your true intentions.

"So I tried to think further back. There was indeed a point at which you threw a sudden, unrelated question at her. It was when we were at the coffee shop started by your cousin. I believe it went something like this. Chitanda has a big face, but I wonder if she knows a certain someone? Chitanda responded by saying that person was a first year in Kamiyama High School."

"Agawa. Sachi Agawa. Class 1-A"

"I have no idea who that is. She was simply someone you used to judge how large Chitanda's face was, right?"

"You should know who Agawa is, Oreki-senpai."

"Chitanda told me the same thing. She gave the pledge as the student representative this year in the entrance ceremony, but simply knowing that isn't enough to say that you know them."

"That's not what I'm talking about."

I stopped walking and turned to face her.

"If it's someone that I should know, then do you mean she's from Kaburaya Middle School?"

"That's right."

If Ōhinata knew her, then it wouldn't be strange if she came from Kaburaya. Unlike Chitanda, however, I couldn't do something like remember the names and faces of underclassmen that I had no connection with. As I thought this, however, Ōhinata started talking as if reproaching me.

“She was the Health Committee president. Do you seriously not remember her?”

“...Was that so.”

Certainly enough, in the latter half of my third year in Kabuyara Middle School, I lost to the majority vote and ended up joining the Health Committee. Because none of the third-years could handle an actual position on the committee as they prepared for the testing season, a second-year was chosen as the president. I guess her name was something like that after all.

Hearing this however, I understood something else.

“I see. If that’s the case, then I can say this with even more certainty. What you wanted to confirm by asking Chitanda that question was: was her face so large that she could even accurately identify a student from Kaburaya Middle School when she herself when to Inji Middle School? When she told you she did recognize that name, I remember that it came as quite the shock to you.”

Ōhinata probably expected her to say “I don’t know” at that moment. After that expectation was shattered, she was dumbfounded. Maybe expectation was the wrong word to use. Perhaps it was her hope. Even though she understood how many people Chitanda knew, she hoped that it wouldn’t be to that extent.

“What Satoshi said was poorly worded. After all, he made it sound like she knew everyone that lived in this city. I’m telling you this just to make sure that you understand, but Chitanda doesn’t know anything about Agawa outside of the fact that she was the student who gave the pledge during the entrance ceremony.”

I had already become used to his exaggerated phrasing. That's why I took everything he said with a grain of salt. It wouldn't be impossible for Ōhinata to misconstrue it as the truth, however, as she had only just started to hear him speak often this year.

Ōhinata shook her head slightly however.

"I wonder about that. And I'm not talking about Fukube-senpai. Didn't Chitanda-senpai also know about your friends as well? She got one of them to show her your old Kaburaya Middle School anthology. She even knew about when Fukube-senpai was singing in the broadcasting room in middle school."

"You're really afraid that Chitanda may know your 'friend', aren't you."

There was no response.

Essentially, that meant Ōhinata had yet to tell me the entire story.

This "friend" was a special existence to her. Even though it influenced her to the extent that she even borrowed phrases, Ōhinata didn't want anyone else to know anything about it. And then, enter Chitanda. She knew about Satoshi's and my past, and according to Satoshi's exaggeration as well, her knowledge of others was something incredible.

"I should've realized you were afraid of Chitanda then and there."

"Then and there?"

"Don't you remember?"

Although I said this, even I myself couldn't remember exactly when it was. Pulling it as clearly as I could from my memories, however, I continued.

“It was when we were talking about how Ibara was sharp-tongued, but we couldn’t imagine her ever snapping at Chitanda. You said maybe it was because she knew and could exploit all of Ibara’s weaknesses. Because it was so ridiculous, neither of us gave it any thought. Thinking about why you might’ve imagined something like that, however, I finally understand why.”

It was because, rather than knowing Ibara’s weaknesses, she was afraid that Chitanda would know hers.

“You were only cautious around Chitanda. Thinking rationally about it, rather than it being Chitanda who would know about your friend, shouldn’t it be me? I went to the same middle school as you after all.”

“Oh, that’s why...”

Ōhinata’s voice seemed to be blurred with resignation as she continued.

“That’s why you said she must’ve transferred here in her third year.”

“That’s right. If she was someone in Kaburaya Middle School and yet there was no way we’d know her, she must’ve transferred in after we had already graduated. At any rate, the fact that you seemed very relaxed around us supports this. You only feared Chitanda.”

It wasn’t something that I did consciously. Before I realized it, a small sigh escaped from my lips. As if fearing that sigh alone, her body stiffened. I couldn’t see a single trace of the underclassman with the winning attitude that I had known in her.

“In order to start thinking about this, I put together a hypothesis based on what I heard about your conversation with Chitanda yesterday after school. Chitanda talked about Ibara. There was neither subtext nor an ulterior meaning. She talked about Ibara.

“But that’s not how you heard it. As you hung from the doorframe contemplating just how much Chitanda knew, you decided that you needed to bring this whole dark and shady matter to light. The conversation you had after was the result of you steeling yourself with the resolution needed to confirm your suspicions. It was possible that that was some sort of metaphor.”

If you implicitly distrusted someone, you might end up seeing them as some sort of demon.

If I accepted this to be true, then I could say that Ōhinata likely saw Chitanda as a yakṣa.

With that, the misunderstanding became clear.

“In her conversation with you yesterday, this is the gist of what she said. To Ibara, the Manga Society was already a detrimental lost cause. In the interest of protecting herself, Chitanda believed that her decision to quit was the correct one. To that, you responded with this. ‘Even then, you shouldn’t just abandon them, right?’ It was strange for you to suddenly use the word abandon. If I had to choose, I’d say it was the Manga Society that chased her away, and yet, why did you choose that word to describe it all of a sudden?”

I took a breath.

“If I’m wrong, just tell me.”

I prefaced it with that.

“Isn’t it that you felt Chitanda was trying telling you to abandon your own ‘friend’ in that conversation?”

Ōhinata looked up at me weakly.

“How can you say for sure that that’s not what she was getting at?”

Even as she said that, I could tell that she herself didn’t believe the words coming out of her own mouth. No one whose voice resonated in such a weak, raspy manner could think something like that.

“...Hey. Can you think of the reason why Chitanda thinks you’re quitting?”

She had a confused look in her eyes, but she didn’t respond.

“She thinks it was because she touched your cellphone without asking you that you got angry at her and wanted to quit the club.”

“What?”

“Can you believe it? Someone who just became a second-year on the verge of tears as she told me she honestly thought that that was the reason. That girl told me she was planning on going to see you after reaching the finish line to apologize for touching your cellphone yesterday.”

Ōhinata’s eyes became wide and her mouth looked as if it were poised to laugh. The only thing that escaped from her throat, however, was something that sounded like a strange, choked sob.

Ōhinata lowered her head. Her shoulders started to shake.

They shook because she was silently laughing; that’s what I wanted to believe.

3. Present: 18.9km; 1.1km Remaining

The scenery opened up before us.

As we finally passed through the narrow residential streets, we neared Arekusa Shrine's rear approach. The street was wide and shops lined the left and right sides of the road. It normally bustled with activity on New Year's and during the spring and autumn festivals, but at this moment, it was dead silent and only the shops' banners retained their festive colors.

"So we get out here, huh."

Ōhinata started to mutter this as if finally being convinced.

"Once you take that path through the shrine, you can connect back up with the original course. Feel better now?"

"Oh come on, it's not like I doubted you or anything."

I wonder about that.

The sun shone brightly as it approached midday. Our shadows took on a deep shade as they stretched along the asphalt. Summer was already just around the corner.

"Senpai."

Ōhinata raised her arm and pointed towards a single shop. A large, old-fashioned umbrella and tatami-styled bench were set up in front of it.

"I want to eat some dango."[53]

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[53] A Japanese, ball-shaped sweet usually made from rice and flour, often sold in 3s on a stick.

“What’s up with that all of a sudden?”

“I’m tired, so I decided I wanted to eat some dango.”

After making this one-sided statement, she immediately started walking to the store. I followed behind her, flustered.

“Hold on a sec. We’re technically in the middle of class right now.”

It didn’t stop her in the slightest.

“You brought me this far off the course and now you want to start talking rules? We might as well break all of them at this point.”[54]

“Do you even have money on you?”

Hearing this, she finally turned to look at me over her shoulder.

“You have some, right?”

She smiled as she said this.

“I could hear the coins clinking around in your pocket.”

Surely enough, I had brought some with me in case I wanted to buy a drink halfway through the course, but...

“I swear, you never stop once you get going. What if I don’t have enough?”

“Oh, I didn’t think about that. Do you have enough?”

I reached into my pocket and pulled them all out. In my palm, I counted ¥240 worth of ¥100 and ¥10 coins.[55]

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[54] Originally the Japanese idiom, “If you end up eating poison, you might as well finish the plate.” (毒を食らわば皿まで)

[55] ¥240 ≈ $2.40

The shop Ōhinata had pointed out was very reasonably priced. Even though there were people here who would still probably buy it at a more expensive, touristy price, the traditional-looking sign on the wall said "¥80 for one stick".

"...I guess I do."

"Then it's decided."

Ōhinata lightly sprinted over to the shop and called out in front of it.

"Excuse me, three sticks of dango please."

Was she planning on sucking me dry? Wait a second, why was I even treating her in the first place? The questions didn't stop coming, but I supposed it was already too late to do anything at this point anyways considering she had already ordered. I guess I could act like a good upperclassman and treat her just this once. ¥80 though... Talk about a cheap favor.

The one working the shop was an old, sweet-looking lady. The two of us must've looked like we ditched class considering we were still in our gym clothes, but without bringing any attention to it, she simply said, "We have mitarashi and yomogi."[56]

"Three yomogi."

"I think mitarashi is better."

"It'd be annoying to deal with any questions if the bean paste got on our clothes."

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[56] Mitarashi dango is the more common rice-flour type dipped in a soy/sugar sauce, while yomogi is a steamed rice type flavored with mugwort.

Thinking about it, that was a very good point. She really payed attention to the strangest things.

Before I fully realized what was going on, the two of us ended up sitting on a bench eating dango. Although I thought I preferred mitarashi because I didn't like the strong, vegetation-like smell of mugwort, the yomogi's fragrance ended up being really refreshing. The sweet taste sank into my bones.

"I feel alive again."

As Ōhinata muttered this, I found myself nodding without realizing it. It had a certain kind of feeling to it. Even though this long-distance running event seemed to carelessly stretch on forever, it was almost like our fatigue itself was being fatigued as well.

Five balls of dango were stuck on her skewer. She ate two more and then looked up at the sky, taking a long, drawn-out breath.

"Ah, I feel so refreshed. I haven't felt like this in forever."

She then suddenly said something to me.

"Senpai, there's something you haven't been saying on purpose, isn't there."

"About the dango?"

"Of course not."

Yeah, there's no way it would be about the dango. There was certainly a very large gap present in our previous conversation. I hadn't intended on saying anything about it, but Ōhinata brought it up herself.

“There was a certain ‘friend’ of mine that I wanted to conceal, and I was afraid that Chitanda might’ve known about this person and me. Why was that, then? Why, do you think, was I trying to conceal the existence of this ‘friend’?”

“I haven’t the slightest idea.”

“You’re so full of it. If you’re going to be kind and tell me a lie, at least make it a good one.”

Without saying anything, I stared at the dango in my hand.

I guess she saw through me. I did have a general idea as to what might’ve happened. It might even be more accurate to say that it was precisely because I figured out what I had that I was even able to put everything together in the first place.

I hadn’t intended on talking about any of it however. I thought it was something that she wouldn’t have wanted anyone else to know about. That said, it wasn’t like I was entirely certain that I knew the entire truth.

“Man, why did it have to come to this.”

As she muttered this, Ōhinata pulled another dango off with her teeth.

She then started to speak.

“I thought she was a good person. Just like you said, senpai, she... that girl transferred here in her third year. She was a really strange one. I didn’t know if she had trouble making friends or if she didn’t even care about having any in the first place, but she was really independent.

“I was her very first friend and probably her only friend in this entire city. She told me this herself, after all. The two of us made a promise that’d we’d never leave each other.”

“That’s a tough promise to keep.”

“I didn’t think so when I made it, apparently. I was pretty dumb.”

She beamed at me.

“I mean, I was in middle school after all. Kids in middle school are all pretty dumb, aren’t they.”

You’re one to talk considering you just graduated from it two months ago.

“We didn’t really talk that much while we were in school. It felt like a secret between the two of us. That’s why I don’t think anyone really knew about us being friends even though we were in the same grade. The second school got out, however, she’d show me all sorts of ways to have a good time. She took me to concerts, she taught me billiards, and we even started something like a little band. She was also the one who taught me about ‘MilleFleur’ jam, like the one we saw on your birthday. I told you I got this snow tan from when I went skiing, but it was the first time I ever tried it when she took me on a ski trip. It was really fun.”

“It wasn’t snowboarding?”

“I keep saying it was skiing, jeez.”

As someone who had embraced the energy-saving lifestyle, I didn’t really know a lot about the different ways one could mess around.

That said, there was something that I did understand about the whole thing. To have that kind of fun, you needed money.

Ōhinata had gone on a ski trip to Iwate. She had followed a band on tour from Sendai to Fukuoka. As I heard her mention these things, I always wondered what she was doing about the money.

My sister travelled the world on a whim, but the only reason she could do that was because she earned enough money to make that possible. Ōhinata wouldn't have that ability most likely as a middle school student. I had originally thought that her family was simply wealthy enough for those kinds of expenses to be covered by her allowance, but judging by the complaints she accidentally talked about while in *Blend*, I ruled that out as being impossible.

"And then... I ran out of money."

Only her mouth was still smiling.

"If I remember correctly, your family doesn't let you work part-time, right?"

"That's right. They're pretty strict."

"Even though they let you go on those trips?"

"Only because I was with someone else. Essentially, they don't trust me."

Ōhinata then muttered something else, almost sounding like she herself hadn't thought of it up until this very moment.

"Even if they said it was okay for me to get a part-time, I'm not even sure I would have wanted to do it to support that kind of fun anyways..."

Ōhinata had previously said "it was really fun." I couldn't imagine that being a lie, however it also looked as if she couldn't truly enjoy

it from the bottom of her heart because of the wasteful spending that accompanied it.

"Even though I made it a point to say, 'Sorry, I don't have any money at the moment,' I don't think it quite got through to her. She was quite peculiar, you see, so she'd just tell me to take care of it somehow so we could continue doing stuff together. I couldn't do anything about what didn't exist however, and besides, I had exams coming up. While I was at a loss for what to do, she told me, 'Just leave it to me.' She told me, 'It's fine. We're friends, aren't we?'"

There were any number of ways to get your hands on some money, even for a middle school student. The only problem was how you would go about implementing them.

After talking to this point, Ōhinata started to fumble around with her words. She was likely still on the fence about if she should continue or not. It would probably be for the best if I helped her out.

"...When you have something you want to avoid talking about at all costs, it's really difficult when you end up face-to-face with another thing that brings that very subject up."

Ōhinata tilted her head to the side as if unsure about what to say.

"If that kind of thing remains out in the open, someone is bound to suddenly become curious regarding it. If you make a concerted effort to hide it, however, people are liable to become even more interested in why you did that."

Take my birthday, for example. I was constantly distressed about how I might go about dealing with the lucky cat that pointed to the fact that Chitanda had come to my house once before. As long as it sat there on the table, I wasn't sure when it'd be brought up in

conversation. It was too unnatural for me to simply remove it, however, so I couldn't do that either.

"By the time Chitanda arrived, something had disappeared unnaturally. I could pretty much guess what had happened because of that."

"Chitanda-senpai? When?"

"When we went to the coffee shop."

Ōhinata probably did it subconsciously, which was also probably why she didn't understand what I was getting at right away. When she did, however, her eyes opened wide and she stared at me unblinkingly.

"Oh, now that you mention it...! Senpai, you even noticed that?"

When we were at the coffee shop, Ōhinata had hid something.

The magazine *Shinsou*.

If I recall correctly, Satoshi had noticed the copy of *Shinsou* in the magazine rack and had asked Ōhinata if she could grab it for him. She had had a difficult time pulling it out. The rack was so crammed tight with various newspapers and magazines that she had to hold it down with one hand as she pulled the copy of *Shinsou* out.

Before Chitanda arrived, the conversation had turned to be about the weather report. I forget the details, but while we were leaving I went to go pull out the newspaper from the magazine rack to verify if what I had said initially about the weather was correct. At that point, the newspaper had easily slid out.

There was space where the copy of Shinsou *had previously been.*

Shinsou had disappeared from the magazine rack. Of course, it wasn't left behind on the counter either. It wasn't really that important where it had disappeared to; it was probably simply hidden somewhere. What was strange, however, was why it had disappeared in the first place. It wasn't obvious at all. Someone had done it on purpose, and if it was on purpose, why would they do it?

"The Suitou Co. incident... In other words, it was because of the story involving the stolen money con featured in that copy of *Shinsou*. You casually took it with you when you went to go use the restrooms. To think it would be exposed by something like that though..."

Ōhinata let loose an unnatural sigh.

"Forget Chitanda-senpai, I should've been more wary of you, Oreki-senpai."

"How rude. I treated you to dango, didn't I?"

"They really are delicious."

She ate another ball, and only one more yomogi remained.

"I'm such an idiot. There's no way of knowing for sure that that just having the magazine in the rack would automatically steer the conversation that way."

"It's true."

"What the hell was I doing? Maybe even I don't know the answer to that..."

After muttering this to herself, she turned to face me and nodded slightly.

“It looks like you basically understand what happened, Oreki-senpai, so I’ll just say it. That girl’s uncle was part of a rich family. Even I wouldn’t be scared if Chitanda-senpai simply had a lot of connections. The fact was, however, that she belonged to an old family, so they would naturally have a lot of old connections to other houses as well, right? She could’ve one day simply said with a smile that she went over to that very house to exchange greetings, couldn’t she have?”

It was an undeniable possibility.

“That’s right. My ‘friend’ deceived her own uncle to get money.”

“A lot of money?”

“It was a lot of money.”

Ōhinata stared at the last remaining dango as she continued.

“I was so scared. Had the police... no, that’s not it. Even had they found out everything, the police would’ve only arrested her, not me. I had nothing to do with it. However, I was afraid of her. If it was in order to be with her ‘friend’, she would do anything. She could even casually laugh off committing a crime. And that ‘friend’ was me. I didn’t know what to do. I had completely misjudged the distance between us. That’s what I’ve always thought.”

Although the sun shone so fiercely above us, Ōhinata’s body shivered for a second.

“After she learned that I was coming to Kamiyama High School, she said so many things to me. Things like ‘Oh yeah? So that’s the kind of person you are?’ and ‘You’re just bursting at the seams with lies, aren’t you?’ She was barely a couple points short on her exam so she couldn’t get in. In the end, however, even though we were

going to different schools, we once more promised that we would remain friends and then promptly graduated. After entering high school, I've came to realize something. I was so incredibly relieved."

Her voice gradually became louder.

"But that's a terrible story, isn't it. Even though its shape is twisted in her head, she still thinks of me as her only 'friend'. ...I don't want to abandon her. If there was some kind of misunderstanding between the two of us, shouldn't I try to remedy that? I can't abandon her. I'm not allowed to abandon her. It would be wrong for me as a human being. That's what I kept telling myself.

"And yet I'm so afraid of it all. I'm afraid of her crime being exposed and I'm afraid of my friendship with her being exposed. The second the idea of Chitanda-senpai coming up to me and saying "You're friends with her, right?" entered my mind, I couldn't bear to face her any longer."

Ōhinata then faced the asphalt in front of us and started to scream like she wanted to crush her words into it.

"I'm... I'm such an idiot!"

The dango shop's owner came out and handed us both tea. We graciously accepted it but there was nothing else we needed. We had been able to rest up completely during this stop in our journey, but we had to eventually reach the finish line.

I stood up and spoke to Ōhinata as she remained sitting.

"Chitanda would be really happy if you joined the club. Ibara and Satoshi as well."

When she raised her head however, she showed me a faint smile as she lightly shook her head.

“I got all scared on my own and then went and blamed it on Chitanda-senpai, and I even ended up saying all those terrible things to her. How could I possibly face her after all that?”

“It was just a moment of anxiety. Things will go back to normal before you realize it. Chitanda doesn’t hold anything against you; in fact she might even be able to help.”

Even I knew that that was impossible at this point. I may have cleared up the misunderstanding between them, but that only proved that Chitanda was entirely unrelated to Ōhinata’s problem.

“I know you’ve been hurt, but you can’t take it out on us.” That was all I said.

And then, as expected, Ōhinata started to shake her head once more.

“I’ll go and apologize to Chitanda-senpai eventually, but I don’t think that I can bear being in the same place as her yet.”

“I see. I’ll be going ahead then.”

The second I turned to leave, she called out to me.

“Do you remember, senpai? Do you remember what I said to you in the front gardens when I decided to join the Classics Club amidst all the recruiting?”

I relaxed my shoulders as I responded.

“Not really.”

I couldn’t see her face, but I could tell she was smiling regardless.

“You’re so full of it.”

How was she always able to tell? Was I really that easy to read?

“Seeing friends with each other makes me happier than anything else in the world. I mean it. So what I’m saying, senpai, is... these past two months... I think they really saved me.”

At this moment, maybe I should’ve turned around and said something else to her. “If you ever feel like it, feel free to stop by anytime.” In the end, however, I couldn’t. Her words came out much faster.

“The dango were good. ...Thank you very much.”

Epilogue - You Should Be Able to Extend Your Reach Anywhere

1. Present: 19.1km; 0.9km Remaining

I firmly tied my laces together. The pain in my right leg had begun to lessen as well. I had finished everything I had needed to do in the span of the Hoshigaya Cup. The finish line wasn't very far off anymore, but I didn't feel like running. I walked haphazardly towards the shrine's empty approach. The road continued straight forward in a gentle decline.

I passed beneath the back approach's massive tori and entered the shrine grounds. It was a straight path to the end, so I assumed that Ōhinata wouldn't get lost. Even though I still continued to worry, I stopped myself from turning around to verify it. I lightly closed my eyes and opened them again, and I suddenly noticed a familiar mountain bike parked by the side of the road. Looking around, I saw Satoshi leaning on a nearby lantern, arms crossed.

Before I could even open my mouth, he called out to me.

"Hey. How should I put this… the walls have ears, you know?[57] The General Committee vice-president heard that a pair of students left the course and decided to come here hunting them down himself."

So someone saw us, huh? Not only that, but to think they even politely notified the committee.

"Pretty impressive of you to guess this spot."

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[57] The original idiom is "the paper walls have eyes."

“Of course, considering the alleyway that we were told the pair walked down was the exact path I told you about myself, Hōtarō.”

Was that so? I couldn’t really remember it all too well. I didn’t recall searching for the street myself, so that was probably the case.

“Are things going to get annoying then?”

Hearing this, Satoshi shrugged.

“I came here to take care of it myself, didn’t I?”

“As long as you aren’t a police officer.”

“Then I’ll be revenue officer. Or did you want me to properly reprimand you, perhaps?”

He said this without sounding amused, and then asked me another question without waiting for my answer.

“So how did it go?”

After retracing my memories and hearing various stories over a 20 kilometer distance, how did it go? This was my conclusion.

“She’s not going to join.”

“I see.”

Satoshi looked like he had expected it, but he let out a small sigh regardless.

“That’s unfortunate,” he said.

He then sized me up from behind.

“It looks like you know the reason why she won’t join at least.”

“What makes you say that?”

“If you didn’t, Hōtarō, there wouldn’t be any reason for you to talk with her in person. If it’s alright, would you mind sharing it with me?”

I couldn’t nod, however. I couldn’t tell him Ōhinata’s reason, nor could I tell him the truth behind why she had denounced Chitanda and feared her to the point of avoiding her. Even if it was Satoshi Fukube, I felt conflicted. Possibly noticing my hesitation, Satoshi started to walk ahead of me.

“I won’t force it out of you. At any rate, let’s just walk. If you don’t hurry up and pass the finish line, I’ll never be able to leave.”

I stood next to Satoshi as he pushed his mountain bike and walked along the stone-paved road just like we had done shortly after starting from the Kamiyama High School grounds.

Just like he had promised, Satoshi didn’t push the issue. That was probably why I couldn’t remain silent about the whole thing without letting at least one small thing spill from my mouth.

“The problem didn’t have anything to do with us.”

The thing that Ōhinata feared was from her past, and her friend currently went to a different school. The problem concerning Ōhinata’s “friend” was something entirely unrelated to Kamiyama High School.

“I had a feeling…” said Satoshi. “I had a feeling that that was the case. I’m much more forgiving than you are, but even if we overlooked everything during this Hoshigaya Cup, I doubt things would be able to go back to the way they were. If this is unrelated to school, there’s nothing we can do about it after all.”

Thinking back on it, Satoshi had told me something right after the race had started. Make sure I don't take it all on myself. After all, I'm not responsible for anything.

"How did you know?"

He relaxed his shoulders while still dexterously holding onto the mountain bike's handlebar.

"No real reason. I was just thinking that nothing really happens to anyone on campus right after they enter school. Additionally, we kept seeing Ōhinata off-campus as well."

He then looked forward and continued.

"Above all, we're students. We can't extend our reach beyond the school. There was nothing we could've done from the start, Hōtarō."

Was that really the case?

In reality, what Satoshi was saying was true. When we were in middle school, Kaburaya was everything we could see. Now that we were in high school, we couldn't do anything beyond Kamiyama High.

But was that really, truly the case? If we were to lead our high school lives without a hitch, we would complete our second year and eventually go beyond Kamiyama High School. If we were to dutifully continue this for six more years, we would eventually leave the place called school altogether. If we continued to think that we couldn't extend our reach beyond school during this entire duration, we would be suddenly thrusted out into an unknown wasteland, bewildered as the sun started to set.

He was probably wrong.

Just like Chitanda had already carried out various dealings in society, just like my sister had been travelling the world, you should be able to extend your reach anywhere. The only thing inhibiting that was whether or not you had the will to do it.

As an energy-conserving advocate, I didn't possess this will of course. At this moment, however, the smallest semblance of it could be found residing sedimented in the bottommost depths of my heart.

Chitanda had told me that if Ōhinata was truly suffering because of something, she wanted me to help her. I told her that I would. In the end, however, I couldn't do anything.

I could make any number of excuses. Above all was the fact that after I cleared up the misunderstanding between them, the rest fell on Ōhinata to sort out; anything further than that would just be unnecessary meddling on my part.

But what if when I said, "I would just be meddling, so I shouldn't get involved," I was actually thinking "Talking about those kinds of things is a pain, so I don't want to get involved" instead? Rather than it being an issue of whether or not I could even do anything to help, wasn't I simply throwing her feelings aside and abandoning her?

…I was so incredible tired. My thoughts wouldn't come together. Without responding to Satoshi as he tried to console me, I ended up asking something that was simply floating around in my head at the time.

"Satoshi. Do you recall hearing the name 'Sonoko Sōda' before?"

I ended up muttering it far too quietly however.

"What'd you say?"

"…No, it's nothing."

No matter how much Ōhinata had feared the issue of her "friend" being brought to light, I felt that there had to have been inciting incident, a moment that had led her to start doubting Chitanda in the first place. For example, a moment at which she accidentally ended up saying that friend's name.

Thinking about it like this, I could only remember one instance during which Chitanda had clearly said a name in front of Ōhinata; it was when she referenced "Sōda" while talking about finding my address in one of my old class anthologies. Hadn't Ōhinata started to fear Chitanda from the moment she mentioned she was an acquaintance of Sōda's?

Without that first name, "Sonoko," she might've thought that it was simply another ambiguous family with the same name. When I was talking with her earlier, Ōhinata referenced her "friend" using "sonoko" only once, correcting it to "anoko" quickly after.[58] Couldn't it have sounded similar to her friend's name and thus inspired the fear from then on?

It was simply a guess, founded on absolutely nothing concrete, so I'd have to confirm it with Chitanda. And yet, if I didn't have the resolve to try and save Ōhinata, I probably didn't even have the right to ask her in the first place.

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[58] *Sonoko* and *anoko* both mean "that person," but they also sound somewhat like they could be a girl's first name.

As we approached the edge of the shrine gate beneath the massive tori, Satoshi climbed on top of his mountain bike once more.

“From here on, it’s an official school event. Make sure you run properly.”

I nodded and saw him off as he pedaled away. I then started to move slowly and gradually picked up speed from there, returning to the Hoshigaya Cup course. All of the second-years were probably already at the finish line as I could only see first-years in front of and behind me. I looked up and saw the white Rengō Hospital. Beyond it, I should begin to be able to see Kamiyama High School.

I turned back following a gust of wind, but as I looked across the group of suffering first-years, I couldn’t find that smiling, suntanned face. As for how far back she was, there was no longer any way anyone could approximate that now.

Afterword

Good afternoon. Honobu Yonezawa here.

I was inspired to write this volume after first seeing Michael Z. Lewin's book, *Type-A Girl*, although I suppose that's only its name in Japan. More accurately, it's called *Ask the Right Question*.

When I initially saw the Japanese title, I thought, "What could this possibly be about?" and the mystery I imagined formed the basis for this volume. (By the way, the novel turned out to be entirely different than what I had imagined. It was still a great read, however.)

Additionally, I had Stephen King's *The Long Walk* in mind as I was designing it as well. When I had initially read it a long time ago, it was so scary and had such an impact on me that I couldn't put it down, so it was probably only natural that it continued to float around in my head as I was writing this book.

I realized, however, that there was a decisive difference between his book and mine from the very get-go.

The Long Walk's protagonist had companions while walking.

In this book, the protagonist walked alone.

It couldn't be helped. If he was going to be walking the Marathon Event, there was no way he'd be able to match his pace with others.

Now then, I hope that the story of the <Classics Club> will be able to reach you next time as well.

Thank you very much.

April, 2012

Honobu Yonezawa

Hyouka Volume 5 - Approximating the Distance between Two People ふたりの距離の概算 - It walks by past

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